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FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 34 and 36 North Moore Street, New York. Box 2730.

Frank Reade, THE INVENTOR, James Boys
Chasing the
WITH HIS STEAM TEAM.

A THRILLING STORY FROM A LOST DIARY.



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FRANK READE, THE INVENTOR,

Chasing the James Boys With His Steam Team

A THRILLING STORY FROM A LOST DIARY.

PROLOGUE.

A WONDERFUL FIND.

Two men were walking through a dense wood in the western part of Missouri. The heavy forests there a few years ago were more common than at present, though there are even yet forests and praries in which a person could be lost for whole days.

Both these men carried guns on their shoulders, and one had a dead turkey in his hand, the result of the forenoon's hunt.

"Ben," said the man who had the turkey, "were you ever here before?"

"I don't know. The woods look strange."

"They are strange."

"I believe we are lost."

"Well, I know it."

Then the two stopped and gazed for a moment at each other.

"Things have come to a pretty pass, Bob," said the man called Ben.

"Why?"

"That we can't go out for a hunt without getting lost."

"It is a little hard on us, that's all true," Bob answered. "It will be harder if we can't find our way out. I'm getting hungry."

"We can eat the turkey."

Then both looked at the turkey. At last Ben said:

"Eat turkey without bread or salt, bahl!"

"Oh, Ben, you may turn up your fine aristocratic nose at the turkey in that way, but let me just tell you right now, a few days on nothing will make even turkey without salt or bread good."

They both looked up at the sky, but it was so cloudy they could not see the sun.

The woods had very little underbrush, and

the trees were scattering, so that a team could have traveled through it without much trouble.

"Hello, what's this—a road, isn't it?" said Ben.

"It's where there has been a road years ago," Bob answered.

"I don't believe it has been used for ten years."

"I wonder where it goes?"

"It goes to Specter Bend."

Then both paused and looked aghast at each other. People in the West still have some superstition, and Specter Bend is a place where once stood a small village. It was destroyed by the James Boys, every house burned down, and a report having got out that the Bend was haunted, since the last terrible crime it went by the name of Specter Bend.

The expression on the faces of the two men indicated that they had a wholesome dread of Specter Bend.

"Bob, which end of the road goes to the bend?" Ben asked.

"I don't know, Ben."

"Which end shall we take?"

"I don't know."

"I tell you what let's do."

"What?"

"Take neither."

"And go off in the woods again?"

"Yes."

"And be lost?"

"Yes."

After a few moments Bob grew bolder, and with a laugh, said:

"Pshaw! I'm not afraid of ghosts."

"Neither am I."

"Come on."

"Which end are you goin' to take?"

"The right."

"The right might be the wrong."

"I don't believe it leads to Specter Bend."

They trudged along for half an hour, and the road seemed to lead them constantly into a wilder and more dreary part of the wood. At last Bob, who was before, stopped, and, turning to his companion, said:

"The day seems to grow darker every moment, and I be hanged if I believe this road has been traveled since Frank Reed drove his steam team along it when he drove out the James boys."

"I don't either, and I believe we are going right toward Specter Bend."

"Well, we've got to go somewhere."

"So we have."

"Let's go ahead."

The winds had drifted the dead leaves of several autumns over the road, until it was so dim that they scarce could make out that there had ever been a road there.

They waded through the dry leaves, kicking them about in showers.

At last Ben's boot struck something which had a metallic ring about it.

"Hello," he cried.

"What's the matter?"

"I've stubbed my toe."

"Are you hurt?"

"Well, it don't feel very good," Ben answered, sitting down on the road side.

"What did you stub it against?"

"I don't know."

"May be it was a stump?"

"No, it wasn't wood."

"May be a stone?"

"It sounded and felt like tin or iron."

"Where is it?"

"There among the leaves."

"Among the leaves?"

"Yes; hunt it out and see what it is for yourself," growled Ben, who was caressing his injured toe.

"Ha, ha, ha! I will see."

And Bob began raking away the dry leaves.

They heaped up about him, almost hiding him. At last he felt something. It was a hard, smooth substance evidently several inches square.

"Hello!" he cried.

"Have you got it?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

An iron box."

"Iron box?"

"As sure as you live."

"Pull it out."

"Here it is," and Bob held aloft an iron box about twelve inches long, eight inches wide and six inches deep.

"Great guns, what can it be?" cried Ben.

"It's a box."

"But what can it be for?"

"To hold things."

"Rats! You know what I mean. Is there anything in it?"

Ben had forgotten his injured toe in his anxiety to understand all about the box, and was now at the side of his companion examining it.

"Yes, it's got something in it," Bob answered, shaking the box.

"The outside is rusty."

"Yes."

"Can't you open it?"

"No, it's locked."

"Hello, what are those?"

"Where?"

"On the top lid. Letters, as I live."

"So they are letters."

"Can't you make them out?"

"No, too dim and rusty."

"Wait, I'll fix it."

Ben went a little farther down the road to where there was a small round stone, which he took up and brought to Bob.

"Rub off the rust."

Bob took up the sand stone and did so.

In a few moments the letters came out.

"Can you see 'em now?" Ben asked.

"Yes."

"What do they spell?"

"F-r-a-n-k-F-r-a-n-k-R-e-a-d-e, Reade."

"Frank Reade," cried Ben.

"That's it."

"Then by Jove! this is his box."

"You can depend on it."

"Ha, ha, ha, he lost it when he was here years ago and I'll—I'll wager it's full o' money."

"I shouldn't wonder."

Then the two men became jolly, and despite the fact that they were lost, they laughed and joked.

"Let's have it open."

"We must get to a house, where we can get a hammer to break the lock."

"All right; come on," and laughing and joking, they went, without any fear now of the ghosts of Specter Bend.

"It's been a long time since Frank Reade was in this country with his steam team, chasing the James Boys, and he lost this box then," Ben reasoned. "I'll warrant that it's full of money. Frank Reade made millions out of his steam team, and this box is stuffed full of greenbacks."

Thus feeding each other's fancies, they continued to journey and talk about their prospects of a speedy fortune and what they would do with the money when they got it.

At last they came to a house, and with a meat ax, a pair of tongs, and a hatchet assailed the lock.

It stubbornly resisted their efforts for some time, until Bob in his rash anxiety struck it a blow with the ax which shattered the padlock and the lid flew open.

To their amazement and chagrin, not a dollar appeared before them.

Nothing but a thick, leather-back book.

For a few moments their disappointment was so great that neither touched the book. Ben at last picked it up, and turning to the title-page of the book, saw written in a plain, bold hand:

FRANK READE'S DIARY.

CONTAINING A FULL ACCOUNT OF CHASING THE JAMES BOYS WITH HIS STEAM TEAM.

The closely written pages of the last diary were as follows:

CHAPTER I.

THE AGENT OF THREE RAILROADS.

My name is Frank Reade and my home is in New York. By nature I am an inventor.

I once invented a steam man with which myself and a party of friends traversed the plains and had a world of adventures and hairbreadth escapes. I gave the steam man to a cousin named Charley Garse and he became careless with it and it blew up, nearly killing him and a negro named Pomp. My next invention was a steam horse which likewise proved a wonderful success.

The third invention was a steam team with which I traversed the West and had just returned home. I now found myself growing famous.

I could scarce pick up a newspaper anywhere that I did not see some mention of my wonderful invention; though I did all in my power to keep the public from knowing anything about it.

Had I seen fit to have put my inventions on exhibition I could, I believe, have made more money than Barnum ever made. But I kept them in my workshop under lock and key and but very few friends ever saw them.

I should have stated that I am a practical machinist, and have devoted my life to inventions.

But it will be necessary here to describe my steam team as they stood in the shed.

They are two steeds of metal, united by a metallic harness. They are harnessed to a large wagon, greatly resembling an oblong box. The wagon box was spacious, capable of holding a number of people and a large quantity of baggage.

The wheels were large and set far apart to give firmness to the vehicle when in motion. A thorough trial had proved that my team could go in double harness. They were connected on the same plan as my steam horse. Each belly contained a boiler and steam chest, the valves for examination and regulation were on the haunches, the furnaces in the advance of the bellies, the doors being in their chests and the flues run up through the ears while the steam escaped by means of the nostrils."

It required great skill and practice to drive them, for as the power was equally divided, it had to be equally let on to get a uniform motion. If the reins which controlled the levers were not pulled evenly, then more power would be let on in one horse than in the other, and the unequal motion would rack the machinery to pieces. The steam power being independent gave one the ability to run around in a circle, by putting on more power in one animal than in the other, which of course did not matter for a few seconds, although to do that required some very nice skill, and practice alone could acquire it.

I could by reversing the power make the horses back, and as each iron hoof was provided with steel spikes, there was no danger of their slipping.

The body of the wagon was high, and when one would kneel in it, the sides, which were of iron, formed a bullet-proof breastwork. At the rear I had mounted a small four pound rifled cannon. I also had some rifles of my own invention, with globe sights, capable in the hands of an expert marksman of hitting a man's hat two miles away.

One, by reading this accurate description of my machinery, will at once discover that my steam team and armament was formidable.

One night I was sitting in my library reading an evening paper. On the desk at my side were some drawings and plans of my own, for I am never long idle.

There came a rap at my door.

"Come in," I said.

The door opened and a gentleman of fifty entered.

His evenly trimmed beard, dress and manner at once indicated that he was a business man.

"I beg pardon," he said, "but I wanted to see Mr. Reade."

"Frank Reade?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I am Frank Reade."

"But Frank Reade, the inventor."

"I am Frank Reade, the inventor."

"What?"

"I assure you I am Frank Reade."

"But I expected to see a much older man."

I smiled, for I now understood why he was so slow in believing me.

"One does not have to live to be a hundred years old to make a good invention in this fast age," I answered.

Fearing that this man was only one of those bores who come daily to see my inventions and talk about them, I was slow to ask him to be seated.

"I am Nathan Bristoe, of Chicago," he began slowly and carefully, as though he was measur-

ing and weighing every word before he uttered it.

"Oh, Mr. Nathan Bristoe, I am very glad to have met you!"

But I wasn't. One has to tell a fib sometimes in order to be polite.

"I came to see you on a matter of business, Mr. Reade."

"Oh, well, if that is it, pray be seated," I interrupted.

Mr. Bristoe, slow of speech as he was, was quick in his perception, and I thought a smile flitted over his face as he took the proffered seat.

"I am from Chicago," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"I am agent for three great railroads."

"Is it possible?"

"The Chicago and Alton, the Missouri Pacific and the Illinois Central."

"Yes, sir."

"All three of these roads run through Missouri."

"Yes, sir."

"And all three roads have been more or less injured by the great banditti known as the James Boys."

"I have heard of them."

"So has everybody. In fact, a more desperate band of ruffians never lived."

"I presume you are right, Mr. Bristoe."

"Well, we have determined to exterminate the banditti."

"That is a good motive," I said, beginning to wonder how I could personally be interested in the matter.

"We have tried detectives and sheriffs, Mr. Reade, until we find them of no avail. Timberlake has done his best, Wicher lost his life and Carl Greene, one of Pinkerton's best and shrewdest detectives, a man who has never failed in any other undertaking, has failed in this."

"Yes, sir."

All this I had read in the papers.

"Now, Mr. Reade, we want to engage you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you and your steam team. We want to engage you to take your steam team and hunt down the James Boys. Jesse James rides a black horse called Siroc, with supernatural powers. Frank's boy, Jim Malone, is equally as swift and untiring. Your steel horses propelled by steam, may run them down, but no other horses can."

"I am quite sure that my steam team will outrun even Siroc and Jim Malone," I answered.

"I am too."

"And I think I can capture or at least break up the band."

"Well, sir, I am here to make a bargain with you."

"What do you propose to pay?"

"What will you take?"

One question was thus answered by another to make the matter more evasive. I saw at once that in order to succeed I must come right down to business; I said:

"Mr. Bristoe, I will not work for a reward."

"How then will you work?"

"By the month."

"The month?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"For one thousand dollars per month and two assistants whom I shall select, I will undertake it."

"Two."

"Yes, I want two New York detectives."

"Well, will you pay them?"

"Not much."

"What will they cost?"

"Perhaps another thousand."

"Will you agree that the entire salary shall not exceed two thousand?"

"I will not exceed two thousand, but remember it must be two thousand dollars for any month or part of a month. If we only work one day in the month and capture or break up the gang we must have a full month's pay."

"And how about expenses?"

I laughed as I noticed how careful and close the agent was.

"Mr. Bristoe, you represent three wealthy corporations. Three powerful railroads, all with millions at their back, and there is no need in being parsimonious. I am risking my life and a machine which represents my life's work. You should pay expenses."

He soon saw that it was no use to endeavor to beat me down, and he finally consented.

"All right, consider the contract made, and here is one month's pay in advance."

"That is business," I casually remarked, as he counted out the money.

After I had counted it he shook hands with

me and "hoped I would get through all right, Mr. Reade. You are a man of wonderful nerve, I have heard, but all your former adventures are but babies compared to this. The James Boys are desperate men in a desperate cause."

"And will come to a desperate end," I interrupted.

He laughed and replied:

"I hope so. Well, I have to catch the early morning train, so I must go. Good-by."

"Good-by, Mr. Bristoe, and I will be on my way in a week's time."

He was gone. I knew my men, and next day secured two of the best detectives in New York. One was the well known George Brass, and the other a no less personage than Bob Buttons. Both were personal acquaintances and friends, jolly, good natured fellows, and brave as lions. With them, I felt quite sure that I should at least make it quite warm for the James Boys.

CHAPTER II.

A SAD STORY—DISCOVERED.

Two weeks later found us in Missouri. I secured George and Bob, whom I sometimes jokingly called my Brass Buttons. Notwithstanding their rather odd names, they were genial whose souled fellows and just the men I wanted.

The steam team was flying down a road. People crowded the doors and windows of the farm-houses we passed—though there were very few of them—as if they thought a demon from the lower region had escaped.

I don't know how many poor negroes we frightened, but I never saw poor black fellows run so in my life. And who can blame them, for those mettled steeds flying along the road were certainly a very scary object?

"Hello! what's that?" asked George Brass.

"Where?" I asked.

He pointed across a point of timber which came down a ridge, extending far into the ravine.

"Why, that's smoke," Buttons answered.

"Of course it's smoke, but what I would like to know is what is burning."

"The prairie?"

"Not at this time of the year, Bob."

"Well, then, what is it?"

"Houses."

"Houses! Why do you say houses?"

"Simply because there is too much smoke for one house."

I was sitting in the seat and had the reins in my hands.

"Boys," I said, "I am going to find out."

"That's right."

"Go ahead, Reade."

"Crash on more steam."

I did so. The metal horses gave fearful snorts, emitting fire and smoke from ears and nostrils, and their well-regulated machinery began to play.

Faster and faster we flew. The clatter of heavy iron hoofs on the road, and the cloud of dust which rolled behind us was simply terrible. Onward and onward we flew, like the wind. The wagon jostled and jolted and bounced.

I looked back and saw that my companions had about all they could do to hold their places in their seats.

"Talk about jolting," yelled Brass, "if this doesn't beat any I ever heard of, I don't know the meaning of the word."

I laughed, and shouted back to him:

"It's nothing, Brass, after you get used to it," and cracked on more steam.

"About the time I get used to it I'll be dead," roared Brass.

But we were rounding the bit of timber, and I could see a long distance down the valley. There was a long, level stretch of road for several miles, and I put on more steam, and my vehicle flew over the ground. Away we sped like the wind.

The rumbling thunder of wheels, the loud clatter of horses' feet, all made a tremendous roar, like an approaching storm, while behind us there rose on the air a vast cloud of dust.

The road was level, however, and my two companions ventured to stand up and look at the grand sight, the steam team flying along the road at the speed of a lightning express.

"Ho, look," cried Brass.

"Where?"

He pointed off at the right in an angle of forty-five degrees, and there I saw a sight which at once fired my soul. There only a few hours before had stood a peaceful quiet little village.

But now it was ablaze or in smoking ruins. Women and children could be seen on the hill among the woods, crying and wringing their hands in an agony of despair.

I pulled the whistle valve and my steam steeds

gave forth ear splitting screams, as we darted into the ruined village.

The whistles were the first the horrified people had of our approach, and not knowing what those strange monsters could be, some of them took fright and fled away from the spot.

We slackened our speed as we approached.

A few dark bodies could be seen lying on the grass up among the hills, which we afterward learned were bodies of those slain or badly hurt in the fight which took place a short while before our arrival.

I halted my Steam Team near the ruins and called to a woman who stood near gazing at us as if she thought we had come from another world.

Surely the ships of Columbus caused no more wonder among the natives of the West Indies than did my Steam Team.

"Come here!" I cried.

She screamed and fled.

"They are afraid of us," said Brass.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Buttons.

I sprang to the ground and advanced toward an old white-haired man.

He had a slight wound on the side of his head which had probably been received during the skirmish.

The old fellow was rather shy at first, but after a few moments he grew more talkative.

"Who did this?" I asked, pointing to the ruins.

"The James Boys."

"Could you not defend yourselves?"

"We did, but see."

He pointed to the hillside, on which stretched several dark and silent forms, the fruits of resistance.

"How many were they?"

"The James Boys?"

"Yes."

"Twenty."

"So many!"

"Yes, the band is greatly recruited. You might say that every one of Quantrell's old guard has joined them."

"Well, what caused this terrible attack on you?" I asked.

The work had evidently been one of revenge rather than plunder. What could those poor people have to excite the cupidity of Frank and Jesse James. Those gentlemen seldom bothered with people of low degree. It was a fat bank vault or a railway train which they preferred to rob.

The old man rubbed his hand over his wounded forehead, as if he was in great pain, and answered:

"They hate us."

"You mean Jesse and Frank?"

"Yes, and the whole band."

"Why do they hate you?"

"Well, you see, we refused to shelter Jesse. Only a few weeks ago Jesse ventured to ride out on some other horse besides Siroc. Well, Timberlake got after him, and he was easily run down. He abandoned his horse about a mile above here and came in the town on foot. We suspected him, and that night all gathered around him and took him in, and handed him over to Timberlake."

"They never forgave us."

"And Jesse was a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Is he yet?"

"No—they could not hold him. He got away from them, and then the band swore vengeance on us. To-day while we were not thinkin' at all about 'em, they all at once swooped right down on us. We fought 'em, fought like men and they fought like furies. But we were surprised and what could we do? Nothin'," and the old man pressed a handkerchief to his bleeding head.

"Which way did the James Boys go?" I asked.

He silently pointed to a road leading off to westward.

"In that course?"

He nodded.

"And how many did you say there were of them?"

"Twenty. I counted 'em."

I said no more, but went back to my steam team, where Brass and Buttons were waiting in no little anxiety.

"Well, what did you learn?" Brass asked, his eyes flashing with excitement.

I never saw just another such a fellow as George Brass. I believe he loved a fight of any kind more dearly than he loved the best-cooked dinner when he was hungry.

"It is the James Boys."

"Are they near?" he cried.

"Yes."

"Hooray!"

We were about to take our places and start, when a curly-haired young fellow came up. He was bare headed and his face flushed with excitement.

"Say mister," he called.

"What will you have?" I asked.

"Are you going after 'em?"

"The James boys?"

"Yes."

"I am."

"Can I go?"

I hesitated and he began to plead:

"Oh do let me go. I saw you coming when you were away off and I know that you fellows can outrun even Siroc and Jim Malone."

Then he pointed upon the hill where we could see some dark, mangled objects lying in the grass under the trees.

"Just look up there," he added, "I have a brother and a father lyin' in the grass there, and—oh, I want to go."

"Jump in."

"He did so."

"Clear the track," I cried.

The whistle blew and the steam turned on.

Slowly at first the strong, iron-limbed steeds began to move. Slowly at first, and then faster and faster.

The wheels whizzed over the ground, and the people whom we passed gazed at us in amazement and wonder.

A herd of cattle were grazing in the valley below.

I touched the valve rein. Toot, went the whistle, and away scampered the cattle in every direction, giving vent to snorts of terror.

Along the road we flew at an even, yet a terrible pace, for I was determined to overtake the villains and make them pay for their atrocious work.

"Crack on more steam," said Brass.

"Brass is anxious for a fight," said Buttons.

"You are right, I am."

"So am I," cried the man whom we had taken with us.

I made no answer for my whole attention was given to the steam team which was speeding like a whirl wind.

There was not a moment to lose I knew, and I saw that to drive the steam team would require a skill which I flatter myself I alone possessed.

Down a road we thundered and up a grade.

"What is your name?" asked Buttons.

"My name's Jack Cravens."

"You look as if you were craving a little vengeance," began Buttons, when Brass interrupted him with a howl of revenge.

"Oh, Buttons, don't—this is serious enough now, without any of your wretched puns."

"Well, what's a fellow to do before we come up with 'em?"

"Look to you rifles."

"They're in trim."

"Say, you men," put in Jack Cravens.

"What?" asked Brass.

"You've got such a wonderful running machine as this is, I would think you ought to have some extra good guns."

"We have one that will hit the bull's eye every pop at two miles."

"Will it?"

"Yes."

"Let me have it."

"Are you a good shot?"

"I'll not miss with that gun."

"But it has a globe or telescope sight."

"So much the better. Please let me have it."

"What do you say, Frank?"

"He can try it," I answered.

"All right."

At this moment I caught sight of a score of mounted men riding away across the hill.

"Look! look! look! the game is sighted," I cried.

"Where?"

"On our right."

"Correct," answered Brass. "Now Jack take a look at them and see if we are right."

Jack stood up in the wagon as we sped along the ground, and cried:

"Yes, yes, it is they."

"Hurrah—hurrah—hur—," began Brass:

"Silence!" I shouted at him.

"Why?"

"Do you want to let them know we are right on their heels?"

"Oho, they'll know by the snort of the metal horses," and Brass laughed.

Brass always laughed when going into a fight. I never saw a more plucky fellow. I sometimes thought he lacked discretion.

"Where is the gun?" said Jack.

"Here it is."

"Is it loaded?"

"Yes."

"Show him how to use it," I said to Brass.

Brass then explained to the young man the peculiarities of the gun.

I now gave my whole attention to the James Boys and their band of outlaws.

Jesse and Frank James had heard of my wonderful machine, for I had been all through Kansas with it only the summer before, and broken up a fearful nest of outlaws.

I could not hear them, but by aid of the field-glass, which I raised to my eyes, I saw their faces.

Jesse and Frank turned deathly white. Here were a pair of horses which even Siroc and Jim Malone could not outrun.

Jesse pointed to the hill across on their right. I knew that he was announcing that they were discovered.

They galloped across the valley to the left to head us off, and began to ascend a hill. I was not quite sure what their plan was, whether they intended to fight or run.

But a few moments elapsed, during which time I put on a little more power, and we went thundering along toward them. Then Jack Cravens cried:

"I see him—I see the man who killed my brother."

"Where?" asked Brass.

"On one of the horses."

"Then bring him down."

"Are we near enough?"

"Yes, we are less than two miles."

"Will the gun hold up?"

"Yes. Put on the globe-sight, and with it hold her on the spot."

"I'll do it."

Brass showed him, and he put up the globe-sights of the gun.

The James Boys and their band having discovered us, all were flying like the wind up the hill.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" roared Jack Cravens, "now brother, you'll be revenged," and he had his gun leveled on one of the flying horsemen.

CHAPTER III.

SIROC MEETS HIS MATCH.

CRACK!

Sharp and keen rang out the report of the rifle on the air.

A little puff of smoke, but I was watching the result. Would Young Cravens know how to handle the gun?

Yes.

I could not have made a better shot myself. One of the horsemen reeled and fell from the saddle and the others fled for life.

Being near the brow of the hill they disappeared very quickly.

"Now crack on all power. Frank Reade, and bring us up alongside them," cried the anxious Brass. "Oh, do so, I want to get to close quarters."

"You may be made to cry for quarters."

"Buttons, if you don't stop your puns you'll unfit me for duty."

"Ha, ha, ha, old fellow, you will see the time you prefer puns to grins."

"Oh, mercy, he's got rhyming now, what other misfortune will befall us?"

I was paying but little heed to their sallies of wit. I was glad to hear it though, for one who can keep his wits on such trying circumstances, would be sure to be brave in a fight.

As we reached the top of the hill we once more came in sight of them.

We were much nearer than before, and I asked:

"Have you got the rifle loaded again?"

"No."

"Load it."

"Hand it to me," said Brass.

Brass put a charge in the rifle and leveled it at one of the banditti.

"Aim high," I cried. But I was giving too much attention to the steam team, for we were now going over a very rough part of the country.

I suppose Brass heard me, but at the moment he fired the wheel struck one of those hard tussocks or ant hills, so common on western prairies, and gave a tremendous jolt.

Bang!

I was watching the shot. He missed the man, but down went the horse dead.

"Hold up!"

The James Boys sounded a whistle, which we could hear, and a moment later every member of the band had wheeled about.

"They are going to fight," said Buttons.

Buttons was as brave a detective as lives, but he had learned enough of the James Boys to know that they were expert shots, and that we would have a slim show against twenty of them.

I was not slow of comprehending the situation myself, and holding the team well in hand by one of those graceful curves which I always pride myself in, brought them about in a half circle before the James Boys was aware of my intent, and was in full flight.

"Forward!" roared Jesse James.

We could even hear his hoarse voice shouting every word of command to his men. I have heard many a voice that was terrible, but I am sure that I never heard such a voice as Jesse James'. I have met many desperadoes, but never such as the great Missouri bandits.

"I'll fix him!" roared Brass, and he sprang to the small swivel or cannon.

"Brass!" I screamed.

"Well, what?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Fire the cannon."

"It's no use."

"Why?"

"The ground is too rough, and the wagon jolts too much."

"I can hit his horse, if I don't hit Jesse."

"Hit Siroc!" I cried, and although I knew that my whole attention was required to watch the team, I could not but look back at the noble animal.

"Yes."

"Not for worlds."

"Why, Frank Reade?"

"Because I am going to capture that horse."

"Oh, well, if that's your plan, we can't use an uncertain gun."

"Oh, I want to fight!" roared Buttons.

"So do I," roared Jack Cravens.

"Why not stop, Frank, and let 'em come up close enough," said George Brass.

The James Boys were in the lead, and the others coming on like the wind at their heels.

They showed no fear nor indication of halting, but pressed on like madmen.

They were enraged at the loss of one of their number, and seeing we were only four, were determined to overhaul and kill and scalp us, as they sometimes did people whom they hated.

"Stop, Frank, and let us give them a fight. This wagon is bullet proof."

"I have a better plan," said I.

"What is it?"

"Keep out of their range and use our long range rifle."

"Good."

"Now don't shoot at Frank or Jesse James."

"Why?" Brass asked.

"You might hit Siroc or Jim Malone, and I want to capture those horses alive and unharmed."

"Very well."

I then slowed up a little while Jack Cravens pulled away at one of the bandits with the rifle, and brought him down.

Three or four like shots began to open the eyes of our pursuers, and they came to a halt.

"They have stopped," cried Brass.

"All right, we'll stop too," I said, and I brought the steam team to a standstill.

"Brass, you might throw more coal in the furnaces, and you Buttons see that we have an abundance of water."

Both sprang out and proceeded to follow my directions. Buttons succeeded and Brass had only a few more shovels full to put in when Cravens looking back at the pursuers cried:

"They come, they come!"

"What?"

"See, they come."

I looked back and saw the James Boys with all their terrible band at their heels coming down at us at full speed.

"Brass," I cried.

"What?"

"Inside, quick."

"All right, let me shut this door."

"Hurry, they are coming."

The James Boys had seen two get out of the wagon, and supposing that something was wrong with the machinery, determined to charge down on us and make us all captives.

"Hurry, Brass, hurry."

"The confounded thing won't catch."

Crack! went Craven's rifle.

"Close it, quick!"

"They are coming like the wind," roared Buttons, seizing a Winchester and opening fire.

"Hurry, Brass!"

"I can't shut it."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know."

The James Boys were now so near that I could hear the roar of their horses' hoofs, and knowing how well those horsemen rode, and what desperate fighters they were, I understood that there was no time to be lost.

Quick as a flash I sprang from my seat to the ground and ran with all speed to the furnace. The catch had sprung a little owing to the heat, and I struck it a blow with my hammer, sending the door closed with a crash.

"Inside—quick!"

The cracking of the rifles and pistols of Buttons and Cravens now made the air resound with echoes.

I sprang upon the seat, and seizing the reins, threw on the power.

The steam team sprang forward at a bound. But the James Boys were on us.

"Down—down!" I cried.

"I have you now!" roared Jesse.

Brass and Buttons understood me and dropped beneath the iron side, but Cravens either did not comprehend or was too rash to obey.

The steam team could not bound away at full speed, and the excellent horses of the James Boys kept up with us for some time.

"Down, down," I roared to the rash young fellow.

I should state, perhaps that I was no longer in the seat, but down in the great bullet-proof box where from a pair of holes I could watch the road ahead and guide the steam team.

The James Boys were pouring in a perfect rain of bullets, and poor Cravens who, in his eagerness to be revenged, had leaped upon the side of the box, went over, as I afterwards learned, pierced by a score of bullets.

Their bullets rattled like hail against the sides of our vehicle and the metal steeds.

Neither of us dared show our heads, but Brass and Buttons both fired at random and their shots went wild.

I now had the steam team going at a rate of speed which soon began to distance all the horses save one.

That horse was Jesse James' famous Siroc.

Like a meteor that dark wonder flew along over the ground, keeping well abreast of the steam team. Jesse had emptied his pistols, and so great was the rate of speed at which he flew over the ground that even that veteran rider had not an opportunity to reload his revolver.

I could see him from a narrow opening under the seat. I could see the noble animal straining every nerve to outstrip the steam horses. Jesse James had, perhaps, never ridden even Siroc at such a wonderful rate of speed. I doubt if he had ever known before the wonderful powers of that very wonderful horse.

Siroc had met his match.

Never before had the gallant steed found a horse he could not distance, but lo, here was an iron horse that was proving entirely too much for him.

Down the long level stretch of prairie we flew.

"Frank," cried Brass.

"What?" I asked.

"There is Jesse James on Siroc."

"Yes."

"Right alongside."

"I see him."

"Hadn't I better shoot him?"

"Can you do so without endangering the horse?"

"Yes."

"Then do it."

"My gun's not loaded."

"Use a pistol."

"All empty. Hand me one of yours."

"I have already given you my pistols," I said.

I now saw that Jesse's weapons were empty, too, and resolved to again mount the seat and drive side by side with him.

In a moment I had climbed to my place.

We were far ahead of the other pursuers.

"Surrender, Jesse," I cried on regaining my seat.

"Never," was the defiant answer.

"Then you will be run down."

"Fool, you have come West with your infamous machine to capture the James Boys, take that for your pains."

He aimed a blow at me with the butt of his pistol, but I was quick enough to catch the blow on an iron rod that I carried by the seat in front of me. It was the only available weapon at that time, and I seized it and turned aside the blow which he aimed at me.

"Look out Jesse!" cried I, and I aimed a downward blow at his head. The rod, which went down at his head, he dodged, and partly caught on his arm.

His pistol was knocked from his hand.

"Furies seize you," he roared.
 "Surrender!" cried I.
 "Never!"
 "Whack!"
 I struck at him again, and this he partially dodged. The blow only fell on his hip, but produced a roar of pain.

Jesse snatched one of his empty revolvers from his belt, snapped it at me, and then hurled the pistol at my head.

I tried to dodge it, but did not altogether succeed, as it struck me a severe blow on the shoulder and bounced off against the side of my head, and stunned me so that I reeled and for a moment or two came near falling.

As I clung to the side of the seat, I heard Brass cry:

"Buttons."

And Buttons yelled:

"Brass."

"He's killed Frank."

"No, he hasn't."

"Yes, he has."

"No, he hasn't."

"Yes, he has."

"Catch him or he will fall off."

Then it occurred to Brass to save me from a fall which, beneath one of the iron wheels, would have been like plunging beneath the grinding car of jaugernaut.

Brass caught me, and as he shook me up in my seat again he shouted:

"Frank! Frank!"

"What?" I answered.

"Are you dead? Speak. Tell me if you are dead."

"If I were dead I could not speak," I answered.

"Then you are not dead."

"No."

"Bad hurt?"

"I think not."

"Where did he hit you?"

"On my head, I guess. That very important member feels about as large as an ordinary sized hog's head," I answered.

"But you are all right."

Brass was evincing great anxiety.

"Yes, I am all right."

"Good! I would not have you killed or hurt for anything. We want to never give up until we have cleaned up the gang of infamous outlaws."

"Where is he?" I asked, looking about.

"Who?"

"Jesse James."

"By Jove he's fallen back."

I had not been giving much attention to the steam team for the last few moments and it had been speeding along at a tremendous rate.

In fact my hands as I fell having jerked the reins put on full power and we were now going at a dangerous rate.

Siroc had met his match and Jesse James finding it was useless to follow further, slackened his speed and waited for his band which was far behind.

CHAPTER IV.

PROFESSOR DRYDUST.

"WHEW! Well this has been a pretty good heat," said Brass, as the steam team came to a standstill and we all stood looking back at the outlaws, now so far in the rear that it would be impossible for them to do us any harm.

"Are you seriously hurt, Frank?" asked Buttons.

"No."

"Your head is bleeding."

"Where?"

"On the left side."

I now put my hand up to the left side of my head, and just behind the ear the blood was flowing quite freely.

"Well I never dreamed of this."

"Wait a moment," said Brass, "and I'll stop it. I always carry court plaster and everything for an accident."

Brass was sort of a rude surgeon, and in a short time had my wound very well dressed.

"What are they doing now?" Buttons asked.

"Who?"

"The James Boys."

We all looked back.

"They are consulting."

"Yes."

"It's about us."

"What are they going to do about us?"

"Well, I know what they would like to do," Brass put in.

"So do I," said Buttons.

I sat listening to the two detectives and rubbing my head.

"Buttons, it's a shame we haven't got a dozen fellows."

"Half a dozen more would answer."

"Yes."

"But why not turn the cannon on them?"

"The very thing. We can hit one or two, or maybe more with our cannon."

Both turned toward the gun, but I, seeing their intention, cried:

"Hold!"

"Why?"

"Don't use the cannon."

They looked sad and disappointed.

"We must not hurt either Siroc or Jim Malone," I answered. "I am more determined now than ever to capture the horses unharmed, if such a thing is at all possible."

"I don't know that it is."

"I think it is."

"We can outrun 'em, that's sure, but then they can turn quicker."

Brass was a little disappointed.

"Do you know if Cravens was mortally wounded?" I asked, for I did not at this time know that he was dead.

"I guess he is," said Brass.

"He was foolish," added Buttons.

"Yes, it was rank folly for him to stand up on the side of the wagon as he did when they were blazing away at us like so many million fiends."

"Of course it was, but I guess Jack was excited."

"We'll excite the James Boys yet," I said.

"Let us try a shot with the cannon, Frank."

"Not now. The time for the use of heavy ordnance has not yet come."

I had turned about in the sea, for I had fixed my seat so it would revolve and was watching the James Boys.

"Aha, see, they are retiring," cried Brass.

"Yes, they go back sadder but wiser men," answered Buttons.

"They won't want to run afoul of Frank Reade's steam team soon again."

"No, they'll not try to run the team down any way."

The James Boys were all huddled together talking very earnestly, and really they made such a tempting shot for our cannon that I could hardly refrain from trying them one.

But I resolved to adhere to my original plan, which was if possible to capture the two horses alive.

"Where is the long range rifle?" I asked.

"Lost," said Brass.

"Lost!" I cried.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Jack had it when he fell."

"And it's out there on the prairie," said I.

"I suppose so."

"Well, we must find it."

"May be they have picked it up," suggested Buttons.

"If they have not, we must not allow a stone to go unturned until we have found it."

"You are right, we won't."

The James Boys held a conference for a few moments, and then all wheeled about and retreated at a brisk trot.

"On the retreat, ha, ha, ha," laughed Brass.

"They don't find it very comfortable pursuing the Steam Team."

"I knew they'd get enough of it," answered Buttons.

I now seized the reins, put on a small part of the power, and the vehicle began to move.

Slowly at first, the metal steeds snorting fire and smoke at every step, and the wheels crushing and killing the green grass and wild buttercups and daisies.

"What are you going to do now, Frank, asked Brass.

"Follow."

"Follow them?"

"Yes, we will harass them, cut them off, and run them down, one at a time, until we have the last one of them, and then will quit."

"A good idea."

"But it won't do to stop to fire up when we are so close to them," said Buttons. "Especially it won't do to send Brass to do the firing."

"Firing," growled Brass. "It was the old door that wouldn't close."

"Frank closed it."

"Yes, with a sledge hammer."

We gracefully rounded to, and came up directly in the wake of the James Boys, and not over two miles away.

They saw our maneuver, and clapping spurs to their horses, galloped over the hill, and were soon out of sight.

"There, we've lost them," cried Brass.

"Only for the time being," I answered. "Let them go for awhile."

"You won't give them up, Frank."

"No," and I laughed.

We went at a lively rate over the prairie drawing nearer and nearer to the spot where we had first encountered the James Boys.

"Brass, Buttons," I cried, "look for him. Keep your eyes on the ground."

"Look for who?" asked Brass.

"For Jack, of course."

"Oh, yes, you want the rifle."

"We do, and we want to give him decent burial."

"That's so."

Away we clattered over the prairie startling the Jack rabbits and coyotes from their lairs and crushing many an unfortunate prairie rattlesnake beneath the wheels of our vehicle.

"There he is," cried Brass.

"Where?"

"There!"

He pointed toward an object on our left.

I ran the Steam Team close up to it and came to a halt.

Both Brass and Buttons sprang out but I thought it better to remain in the seat and keep my eyes opened for the James Boys or some of their myrmidons might be lurking near.

I had a great dread of some of them getting possession of the team, for we would have been as helpless without the Steam Team as a tortoise without his shell.

The detective went to the body and raised it from the ground.

"Do you see the gun?" I asked.

"No."

"Is it gone?"

"Yes."

"Then they took it."

"Great suds!" groaned Brass, "now they will be raking us two miles away."

"No, they can't!" cried Buttons.

"Why not? They've got the gun, and I'd like to know why they can't, when they are among the best marksmen in the world," Brass returned.

"Because they have no cartridges for it."

"Was the gun loaded when he fell?" I asked.

"No," said Buttons.

"Are you quite sure?"

"I am, because he had just fired it before he fell."

"And he had no cartridges?"

"No. He only fired cartridges just as I handed 'em to him."

"Then we are safe," I said. "They can't use the gun."

We had some shovels and spades and spare boards. So we made a grave and buried the brave young fellow.

"Now to avenge him," said Brass.

"That's the ticket," roared Buttons, as the last shovel of earth had been thrown over our late acquaintance.

"Come every one and get aboard," I said, "for we must be moving."

"All right, here we are."

The tools were put away and the men sprang to their places.

Once more I mounted the box and seizing the rein, gave it a steady pull.

With a snort, the steam horses stepped forward with that fearless, tireless, firm gait, which only a steed of iron can go.

As the wagon went skimming over the prairie at a rate of speed that was wonderful, we all kept a sharp look out for the James Boys. They had disappeared in the woods. The timber was their safety, for we could not pursue them where the trees grew very close together, and it seemed as if those trees in the forest where they had escaped could not have grown closer together.

"What are you going to do, Frank?" Brass asked.

"Skirt along the woods until we find they have left them."

"Let's throw a few shots from the gun into them."

"Oh, no."

"We might drive 'em out."

"And we might kill either Siroc or Jim Malone."

"Confound the horses. I believe they'll be the salvation of the James Boys yet."

"They have been many times," I answered.

"Well, let Frank have his way," said Buttons.

We had run along within about five hundred yards of the woods for about three miles, when suddenly we saw a sight that was both thrilling and ridiculous.

To our surprise we saw a man mounted on a

mule, spur out from a cluster of trees, and dash away as though pursued by Old Nick.

And though the latter personage was not after him, half a dozen of the outlaws were, which certainly made it about as bad.

The mule, fort unately for the rider, had a good start, for though he might have been a very sure-footed, sweet-tempered, patient animal, he was not noted for his speed.

"See, he comes," cried Brass.

"They come."

"They all come."

"Here goes to help the party on the mule," cried Brass, and raising his Winchester, he hit one of the pursuers.

"I guess he's a little sick after that."

"Now for another." Buttons blazed away and missed.

"What's the matter, Buttons?" asked Brass.

"I don't know."

"Try another shot."

Crack!

He missed again.

"Keep cool, all of you, and you'll have your hands full yet."

The pursuers were gaining on the mule every moment. The animal was about a quarter of a mile away from the grove when the foremost of the pursuers caught up with it, and grasped the bridle rein.

With a scream such as only a frightened or enraged mule can utter, that animal sent his heels out with such force as to hurl the horse and rider ten or twenty feet away, and flung his own rider over his head.

At this very moment of victory the mule ran away, leaving his rider prostrate on the ground.

"Hurrah!" yelled Brass.

"Hurrah!" cried Buttons.

"Hurrah!" we all three roared.

And with a united cheer from those who rode behind, the steam team came dashing up to the spot, Brass and Buttons firing their rifles as rapidly as they could all the time.

The James boys saw us coming, and, having had a taste of our skill, they wheeled their horses about and fled like the wind. Brass got in one shot, however. He hit his man too, for we could see him hanging to the saddle as his horse thundered away as though he was bad hurt.

The man whose horse had been kicked down by the mule managed to get up with the beast, and they rode away as rapidly as they could go. I brought the steam team to a standstill.

"Brass!" I called.

"Yes, sir."

"Get out."

"All right."

He sprang to the ground.

"Find the man who rode the mule."

"I will if I can."

"Hadt' I better help?"

"No, we'll risk but one out this time."

I sounded my whistle, tested the steam cocks, and satisfied myself that we had an abundance of steam.

"Here he is," cried Brass.

"Hurt?"

"I believe the old chap's neck's broke," Brass answered.

He was lifting the fallen man to his feet when that individual responded:

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen, I beg your pardon, but I am quite comfortable here?"

"Are you?"

"Oh, yes, but—What has happened?" he said, as though puzzled. He was on his feet now, and I never saw a more laughable-looking personage. He was tall, thin and cadaverous. He was a about forty-five or fifty years of age, and a very sober, sedate-looking fellow, with a body like a lath, a face like a hatchet, and a mouth like a slit cut across the face, while his iron-gray hair reached down below his shoulders.

His clothes were what might be called clerical cut, and very much worn.

"Who are you," I asked, as this tall ungainly looking personage was marched up to the wagon.

"Ah, I beg your pardon, sir, but I am Prof. Roderick Drydust, and my mission in this part of the moral vineyard is to teach the young idea how to shoot."

"Well, my friend," said Buttons in his quaint dry humorous way. "I don't know but that you were teaching some of the James Boys to shoot."

"That's a wretched pun," put in Brass.

Prof. Drydust carefully brushed his almost thread bare garments and looking at me said:

"I am Prof. Drydust, sir, and—and—let me see, have I lost it?" He began feeling about in his pockets for something.

"Have I lost it, if I have I am a ruined man."

"What is it, your pocket-book?"

"Oh no, money can be replaced but that never."

"A letter of introduction?"

"No."

"Instructions?"

"No, I could get new ones, but this—oh this could not be replaced. Ah, here it is," and a smile which was positively hideous came over the professor's face.

"What is it?"

"My journal."

He drew forth from an inside pocket an old book, one which had been considerably worn by long wear and use.

"What is that?" I asked.

"My journal, sir, the most important document in the world, I beg your pardon, your ten thousand pardons my dear young friend, but don't you keep a journal?"

"Yes, I keep a diary."

"Oh, the same thing, sir, the same thing."

Notwithstanding we were in momentary danger of being attacked by the very men who had come so nearly taking his life, he whipped out his pencil and asked:

"What is your name?"

"Frank Reade."

"Frank Reade," he repeated, writing it down.

"Where are you from?"

"New York."

"Well, well," and he wrote, reading as he wrote: "On this day I met Mr. Frank Reade, of New York, under very peculiar circumstances, which are as follows."

"Hold on," said I.

"Wait—wait until I write the circumstances in my journal."

"We have no time for the circumstances, Professor Drydust."

"Why?"

"The James Boys are not—"

"The James Boys—oh, yes, I must not forget to write that down in my journal."

"Look here, Professor Drydust, if you want to get away with your scalp on your head you had better come aboard this wagon."

"But, Mr. Reade—Mr. Reade, I have just now a brilliant thought. Please let me jot it down before it escapes my memory."

"The James Boys will be jotting you down."

"Go off and leave him."

"Inside, quick!" I cried. "We are going to get under way."

He realized his danger at last, and with his precious journal in his hand, climbed into the wagon.

I applied the power and away we went skimming over the prairie as a swift sailing yacht might over a smooth sea with a favorable breeze.

"Well, well, I must remark that you certainly have a very wonderful invention," cried Professor Drydust, watching the steam team as it thundered along over the ground. "I believe I will write a full description of it in my journal."

CHAPTER V.

THE STEAM TEAM TO THE RESCUE.

I AM a very patient sort of a fellow generally. I can stand an ordinary bore, but that Professor Drydust made me very tired about his journal.

He was the most complete monomaniac on the subject of keeping a journal it has ever been my painful duty to see.

"I want to talk to you about my journal," he said, climbing up on the seat by my side.

"What do you want to say?" I answered.

"I am glad to know you keep one."

"Yes, I do, but in these troublesome times, I find very little time to talk about it."

"Well, perhaps you do. Yet what a pleasure it is to have it to refer to in after years."

"I suppose so."

"And mine—oh, what a journal mine is! It contains my brightest thought. Did you never have a brilliant idea flashing in your brain in the still watches of the night? I do and then I rise at once and record them in my journal. Many a man, who is too lazy to get out of bed, would just lay there and allow those brilliant ideas to effervesce—"

"There they are again," cried Brass, cutting short the long-winded lecture of Professor Drydust.

Crack!

The distant report of a rifle rang out on the air, and a ball came whizzing through the air.

It passed a few inches above our heads, and Professor Drydust shrinking back cried:

"Why, what was that?"

"A bullet."

"Now do you suppose they shot at me?"

"I don't know, it looks very much like it."

His face grew more grave, more serious and cadaverous than before, and clutching my arm he said:

"Mr. Reade, Mr. Reade!"

"Well, sir, don't hold my arms, because I have these steam horses to hold and they are about all I can manage," I said.

"Well, I have a request to make of you."

"What is it?"

"Should I fall I want you to—"

"Look after your wife and children?" I asked.

"No, I have never burdened myself with a wife and children."

"Then what is your request?"

"That you save my journal."

There was no time for all this nonsense and I knew it.

The James Boys and band, now to the number of forty or more, hung like a cloud on our left, and some of them had long range guns.

As every man on the frontier is a marksman these fellows, of course, were dangerous shots.

"Frank, they have been reinforced," called Brass.

"How many do you make out?" I asked, now giving my attention to the steam team which was galloping away beautifully over the prairie.

"There are forty at least."

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

Three shots came whizzing through the air, and one struck against the tail gate of the wagon, with a ring.

"That's cutting close," cried Drydust.

"You had better get down in there."

"Where?"

"Where the others are."

"But you?"

"I am used to it. I have to take my chances," I answered. I did not tell him so, but really I would about as soon be exposed to the raking shot of the enemy as to his harangue about his journal.

"Frank, crack on more steam."

"Are they coming after us?" I asked.

"Yes—keep to the right well up the slope, for, see, they are trying to head us off. To drive us down into that ditch."

I turned the powerful heads of my metal steeds up a sloping hill, and put on full speed.

Away we flew.

The iron hoofs, armed with steel spikes, cut the turf, and sent it flying into our wagon.

"Hold on to your places," I cried. "We are going to run at full power now."

The motive of the enemy was quite plain.

They had only to make a short cut around a hill so as to get to the bridge ahead of us, and then we would be at their mercy.

But I had a plan which I believed would work.

We could outrun them, I knew, and the steam team did bravely.

The roar and thunder of the river ahead of us could be heard, and now we are in full view of the great covered bridge. I saw the James Boys, Jesse and Frank, ahead only five or six hundred yards away.

They gave us a volley.

"Don't fire back," I cried.

"Why?"

"Wait until they are closer."

"Can we make it?"

"With ease."

"Won't they pursue us beyond the bridge?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Wait and you will learn."

And they did learn what my plan was.

Like a tremendous whirlwind we sped along the ground toward the bridge, and as we went over it with a rumbling like thunder, making every timber of the covered bridge strain, I suddenly pulled open an under grate and let two great heaps of blazing coals fall upon the bridge.

They ignited in a moment.

"What did you do that for," cried Brass, as we thundered across the bridge and began climbing the hill on the other side.

"Look back and see."

"Why, the bridge is on fire."

"So it is."

"They can't follow us. I have burned the bridge behind us," I cried.

"Ha, that's a good idea, a splendid idea, one worthy of preservation, and I will put that down in my journal," cried Professor Drydust.

"Where are you going now, Frank?" asked Brass.

"I don't know."

We ran up on the hill, and then, making a

graceful curve, I brought the steam team like a four-in-hand around, and we all gazed back at the burning bridge.

The wood was very dry, and it ignited like a tinder box. In a moment the whole thing was in a blaze.

"What a smoke," said Brass.

"Yes."

"Do you see the James Boys, Buttons?" Brass asked.

"No."

"What's that moving on the other side the river?"

"A man on a horse."

"You can't see it plain."

"No, the smoke is too thick."

"Don't it burn?"

"Looks as if the blaze would touch the sky."

"So it does."

"How high they leap!"

"They do."

"There goes the bridge."

"Oh, what a crash!"

"The water has swallowed up the smoking ruins."

While they were talking of the burning bridge Professor Drydust was busily engaged writing in his journal.

"What are you writing?" Brass asked.

"I am writing a description of the burning."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"How far have you got?"

"To the crash."

"Well, go on."

"I guess we will all go on," I remarked.

"Why not wait and watch it awhile longer?" asked Brass.

"Look at the sun and you will see that it is time for us to be hunting a camping-place."

I turned to the team and opened the valves.

We went rapidly over the hill and struck a large, well-traveled road.

For an hour we sped along. When I became assured we were at a safe distance from the James Boys I began to look about for a suitable place for camping.

The sun had nearly set, and the night would soon be upon us.

Suddenly we came in sight of some plowed fields, and a little further on was a house. It had now grown dusk, and as the steam team thundered along the road, stamping and puffing great volumes of smoke and sparks, it looked very much like a demon escaped from the lower regions I have no doubt.

Suddenly we heard a scream ahead.

The scream came from the house to which we were approaching.

It was from a girl.

"What's the matter?" we heard the mother ask.

"The steam mill has broke loose, and is coming right up the road."

"Oh, what nonsense!"

"It's so."

"Hush!"

"Come and see for yourself."

"I'll box your ears, Katy, for saying anything of the kind."

At this I touched the whistle cord, and the steam horses gave forth a scream, which would to the woman in the house seem to confirm the girl's story.

"Laws of massy!" we heard her exclaim.

Then she ran to the door, gave one glance at the fiery monster thundering up to her very door, and cried:

"Oh, law, we are undone—it's Old Nick himself!" and she sank down helpless in the door.

"It is not Old Nick, madame," I answered, stopping the team and slipping from my seat on the box.

I ran to her, and seeing she had fainted from fright, called to the girl to bring me some water. She did so, and in a moment the woman began to recover her consciousness.

"Don't be alarmed, madame, I said for we are only people like yourselves and I assure you we won't harm you."

"But your horses, what kind of horses have you?" she asked.

I laughed.

"Our horses are of iron," I answered.

"See, they eat fire."

"They are like locomotives."

"She recovered rapidly and went out to see the wonders which stood at their gate."

The farmer came home from his work in the field and was amazed at seeing the Steam Team.

"We would like to stay at your house over night," I explained.

"Well, I reckon ye kin." Don't want ter put yer horses in the barn I guess."

I appreciated his joke and laughed as I answered.

"No but we will run the team into your lot."

"All right—I'll open the big gate."

"He did so and we ran the Steam Team into the house lot and left it with the heads of the steam horses toward the gate."

We remained all night at the farm house and next morning were at breakfast when a man on horseback galloped up to the door gate and called out:

"Hello, Grierson?"

"Hello, Shoemaker!"

Grierson, our farmer, got up from the table and went out to the front gate.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

No doubt he then saw by the face of his friend and neighbor that something had gone wrong.

We were near enough to hear even at the table, for in this house, like many houses on the frontier, the front room answered for both kitchen and parlor.

"The James Boys, fully forty strong, have crossed the river," said the man on horseback.

"Have they?"

"They have."

"When?"

"This morning at sunrise."

"I thought the bridge was burned?"

"So it was," answered the man on horseback, "but they forded the river. Swam their horses over."

"What are they going to do?"

"They intend to attack Raytown. There's no doubt about it."

"Do you think so?"

"I know it. They were moving that way, and I have rode everywhere to rouse all the people I can. We don't want another scene like Shopville was yesterday."

"No, we don't."

"Grierson, have you a gun?"

"Yes."

"A good one?"

"Pretty fair."

"Rifle?"

"Yes."

"Pistols?"

"One revolver."

"Won't you fight?"

"I never backed out yet," cried the brave farmer.

"Well, mount your horse and ride to Raytown. Take your gun and all the pistols ye've got. We won't have a minute to lose."

"Where are you goin'?"

"Goin' up here to git old man Lutes and his four sons and three sons-in-law, with their guns and dogs and horses, and we will just naturally make it so hot for the James Boys they won't cross over into Kansas again soon."

I did not know until this assertion was made that we were in the State of Kansas, but it seems that we had entered the prairie state on crossing the river.

The horseman galloped away and Grierson turned about and started to the house.

"Brass, you and Buttons fire up," I cried.

"What are we to do?"

"The steam team goes to the rescue."

"Hurrah."

"Aye, very enthusiastic, I will put that down in my journal."

Brass and Buttons were out in a moment and had the fires started anew in the furnaces of the steam team.

"Now, sir, are you going to the rescue of that town?" I asked of the farmer.

"Yes."

"So am I."

"Shake."

"Have you arms?"

"Here they are."

He took down an old army rifle and a revolver.

"I'll saddle up."

"No, get in the wagon."

"Ah, yes, sir, the wagon, it is a wonderful wagon," interposed Drydust, "and I have here a fine description of it in my journal."

"Never mind that now," I said, "come on."

He took up his weapons and followed me to the barn, but where we found everything in readiness.

The hiss of escaping steam told that we had on a good head of that article.

"Is all ready, Brass?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How is the water?"

"Boiler's full."

"And coal?"

"Plenty for some time yet."

"All aboard."

"Here we are."

Everybody climbed upon the wagon.

The farmer's boy opened the gate.

As I took my place on the driver's seat, I heard a voice say behind me:

"This will be a wonderful day of adventure, all of which I shall record in my journal."

I glanced back behind me and beheld Professor Drydust sitting with others in the wagon.

"I wish we could leave that old fool and his journal, too, behind," said Brass, who had taken a dislike to Drydust.

"The gate's open," said the small boy, who was anxious to see the steam team go thundering down the road.

"All ready, clear the track!" I cried, and put on the power. The steam team bolted out into the road, and we went thundering along at a speed unknown to living horses.

"The steam team to the rescue!" cried Brass, growing enthusiastic.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STEAM TEAM CAPTURED.

We saw men and boys everywhere, armed with almost every kind of a conceivable weapon, hastening toward the threatened village.

Never since the first shots fired at Leexington roused the sons of liberty in North America has there been such a turn out to fight a foe.

We stopped two or three times and picked up some fellows along the way who were armed with rifles and double-barreled shotguns.

"Great gosh!" I heard one boy cry as we came thundering up the road, "jist look thar!"

"What ist it?" asked another.

"A train o' kears broke loose and running through the country!"

"It's old Nick!" cried another.

"Frank," cried Brass, "do you see the town?"

I was sitting higher than the others, being on the seat.

"No."

"We can't be far."

"How far are we?" I asked of one of the farmers.

"'Bout four milds."

"Which way is it?"

"Don't yer see thet air hill?"

He pointed to a hill covered with trees and underbrush.

"Yes," I answered.

"Wall, it's erround that. Now look whar the big road bends erround that, and when we git erround it we'll be in sight o' ther town."

"Will we?"

"Yes."

Then I cracked on more steam.

We could hear a noise off to the right three or four miles.

Men could be seen everywhere on horseback and on foot, running toward the threatened town.

Partly from excitement and partly to escape the ceaseless hurangue of Prof. Drydust expatiating on the virtues of his great journal, Brass stood up behind me clinging to the seat.

"Frank," he said.

"What, Brass?"

"If we get in a scrimmage, and any one has to go under I do hope it will be him."

"Who?"

"That Prof. Drydust."

"Why?" I asked laughing.

"I am tired being bored with his journal."

"Well, Brass, the chanes for a lively skirmish are quite flattering."

"Do you think so?"

"I do."

"These fellows mean fight."

"Yes, and the James Boys are not to be backed down. Where did they get so many men?"

"Their ranks are always recruited," the detective answered. "I have heard it said that Jesse and Frank James could almost at any time muster a hundred men to battle."

"I believe it."

"Hark! What's that?"

"The village church bells are ringing," I answered.

"Yes, you are right."

"What does it mean?"

"Alarm."

"The James Boys have been sighted."

"Hark?"

"Aye, do you hear that yell?"

"Yes."

"And shots?"

"I hear them."

"Put on more steam."

I now let the power on to the full capacity which I dared, and the road being broad and

level, we flew along at a rate of speed which almost took our breath away.

I cast a glance behind me at the farmers in the wagon, and I never saw a more terrified-looking set of wretches in all my life.

"Gosh! we'll be capsized and slung across the State!" roared one fellow.

"Don't be afraid," Buttons answered. "He knows how fast to run it."

"Yes, yes, gentlemen, a very remarkable machine indeed—a remarkable machine," said Professor Drydust. "I have a full account of it in my journal, which I will read to you by and by, as soon as we get a little leisure."

We sped like lightning around the tree-covered mound, and in a few moments were in full view of a pretty little village, all frame houses, neat, clean, white, and pretty.

The excited populace were running hither and thither in every direction.

Women were screaming, men were seizing guns.

A body of horsemen, forty or fifty in number, were approaching the village from the west, while we were coming in from the north.

I saw at once that we would not have time to reach the village before the horsemen, as they were fully a quarter of a mile nearer, and I cried:

"Brass, Buttons!"

"What?"

"What?" both cried.

"Work the gun."

"The cannon?"

"Yes," and I began swinging the team around so as to bring the tail-end of the wagon to the village.

"Why, do you mean to fire it?"

"Yes."

"You might hit Siroc or Jim Malone," said Brass somewhat sarcastically, for the reader will remember that this had all along been my excuse for not using the cannon.

"Never mind that now," I answered. "Better lose both Siroc and Jim Malone than a single human life."

Having brought the steam team about stern to the town, I reversed the engines and we began backing into the town.

We could back almost as rapidly, though not quite, as we could go forward, and it required much more skill to run backward than forward.

"Hurry up!" I cried, as I heard another yell from the banditti, and a sprinkle of shots began to sing out on the air.

"Slow up a little, Frank!" cried Brass, who was sighting the gun.

I did so.

"Take sure aim."

The steam team was almost stopped and Brass, at last having sighted it, cried:

"Fire!"

Buttons jerked the cord.

I had turned about to watch the effect of the shot.

The two pound ball went whizzing across the west end of the village, clipped off a top rail, from a fence, and down went one of the banditti horse and all rolling in the road.

"Reload quick!" I shouted.

Then I suddenly changed the power. The steam team bounded forward with a suddenness which almost unseated everybody and again I wheeled them about, and we were thundering down on the village.

The sharp boom of the swivel gun caused everybody at the village to turn their eyes toward us.

Then when fire-vomiting horses were seen drawing a curious-looking wagon, everybody screamed and took flight.

As for the James boys, they seemed paralyzed at our appearance.

At least we thought so then, but we were, ere long, to learn that as far as Frank and Jessie James were concerned, they had no dread of us.

The entire body of bandits wheeled about and beat a precipitate retreat.

I ran the steam team into the village, and in a short speech assured the people we were their friends, and had come to defend them against the banditti.

Everybody crowded forward to see the wonderful steam team, and nearly all had heard of it before, but had believed all along that it was not a reality.

As I concluded a wild cheer went up from the crowd. Someone proposed three cheers for Frank Reade and his steam team, and three cheers were given in such lusty tones as made the welkin ring.

The echoes of those cheers had not ceased to reverberate when a tall, ungainly-looking figure, which had been sitting in the bottom of the

wagon, struggled to his feet and mounted on the side of the wagon-box.

"Ladies and gentlemen, quite pertinent to the issue indeed are those ringing cheers, and I will write that down in my journal."

"Oh, sit down," roared Brass.

"Very appropriate."

"Don't you hear?"

"A good word, yes. I'll just jot down that thought in my journal also."

Brass was so exasperated at the old fellow that he seized the tails of his faded coat and pulled him back into his seat.

"Now sit down."

Everybody laughed.

I joined them. I could not help it.

As for Professor Drydust, he was so intent on catching some brilliant thought on the fly and jotting it down in his journal that he never ceased to write.

The villagers were very grateful to us for having saved their pretty little town, and would insist on giving us a banquet, which they did.

Everything that one could wish for was brought to us, and we feasted like kings.

Next day we took our departure. Nothing more had been seen of the James Boys, and the villagers hoped they would never hear of them again but we cautioned them to beware of the outlaws and under no circumstances to allow themselves to be taken unawares.

Our steam team was hissing and impatient to go.

I climbed to my seat and Brass and Buttons were in places, the former crying:

"Go ahead, Frank," when suddenly a tall, angular looking figure at this moment appeared and leaped on the vehicle.

Under his left arm he carried a book and had a pencil in his hand.

"Are you going with us?" cried Brass.

"Why yes, why not, my dear anxious friend. You are unsophisticated."

"Well, why are you going?"

"To pick up incidents of travel, I assure you."

"You had better stay behind."

"Oh no, I could not. I say, friend, do you keep a journal?"

"No."

"Well, you should, you will find it wonderful convenient. Now your friend there, Mr. Reade, keeps an excellent diary; I saw him writing in it last night and I know that it is a good one."

I had the reins and opened the valves.

The steam team started up. Then the crowds shouted, I blew the whistle and away we went like the wind.

The forenoon was passed without any adventure worth narrating. Professor Drydust had been very quiet.

We noticed that he had brought an excellent rifle with him and a brace of revolvers.

When asked why he had brought them he answered:

"Verily, a man must needs defend himself. Now, that's a good maxim, a golden text for a Sunday school lesson. I must write that down in my journal," and he hastily wrote.

We were on a vast prairie. The James Boys having crossed over the line into Kansas, would be easy chasing for us, we thought. But had they gone back into Missouri, or would we find them still in Kansas?

The prairie in this part of the country is interspersed with vast groves of trees everywhere, and in some places the groves were large and so dense that one could not see any distance in them.

The team was halted near a lovely spring of clear cold water, and we all got out.

"Oh, what a delightful spot," remarked Professor Drydust, opening his journal and looking about in admiration. "I really must write a description of it."

"Frank," said Brass.

"Well, what, Brass?"

"Is there no way to get rid of this old crank?"

"No."

"Then I almost wish for another attack from the James Boys."

"Why?"

"In the hope he might be killed."

Buttons laughed and remarked:

"It would do no good, Brass."

"Why, Buttons?"

"That old fellow can't be killed by a bullet."

"Well, then, let's turn the cannon on him."

The old professor was the meanwhile walking about near the grove. He had taken his rifle with him, he said, to shoot some game.

"Now, let him get off a few hundred rods," Brass whispered. "And then we'll all get in the wagon, and pull out and leave him."

I laughed at the plan and told Brass we could not afford to be so cruel.

"Hello!" called Buttons.

"What's the matter," I asked.

"I see a deer!"

"Where?"

"Over the hill."

He pointed across a ridge which was partly covered with grass and partly with bushes.

Now the hunting desire was quite strong in all of us, and at my suggestion we all seized rifles and started out to stalk the game.

"Be careful, keep low," I said.

We crouched low as we ran a long distance up the hillside. Had I been less excited, I would have been more cautious and at least left one with the steam team.

But every body wanted a shot at that deer, and I had it not in my heart to command any to stay.

"Where is the deer, Buttons?" I asked.

"Don't you see it?"

"Where?"

"There is the head just over the hill."

"Yes, I see it now."

"So do I," cried Brass.

"There it goes."

We could only see the head and horns of a stag as it moved slowly out of sight around a thicket.

But our blood was up, and we determined to have that stag.

"Come this way," I cried.

"To the left?" asked Brass.

"Yes. Keep well under the hill and out of sight. Keep low, so he can't see you."

"Frank!"

"What, Brass?"

"We are out of sight of the Team."

"Yes."

"We ought to keep it in sight."

"It won't run away," Buttons laughed.

"And we can't take it with us," I added.

"No."

"We'll not be gone long."

"Now, be careful."

"Yes."

"We're not far."

We ran around the hill, holding our guns ready.

"We will come up to windward and tumble right in on the deer," said I.

"Yes, yes."

We were all eagerness.

Everybody wanted to be first to see the deer.

With rifles cocked, and at our shoulders, we ran up the hill, and reached the spot where the deer had last been seen.

Here a sight met our gaze that might have appalled stouter hearts than ours.

"What was it?" methinks I hear the readers of this diary ask.

It was a deer's head and skin stuck on a pole and the end of the pole in the ground.

So natural and life-like did it appear, that Brass came very nearly to firing at it before he discovered that it was not a deer, and only an effigy of one.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"Frank," said Brass, panting so he could hardly talk.

"What?"

"It's a trick—a blamed mean trick."

"All is not right," put in Buttons.

"I am convinced of that myself," I returned.

"Come, let us get back to our steam team."

"All right."

We all ran and tore our way through the bushes over the brow of the hill, until we were in sight of the valley below where we had left the steam team.

Here a sight met our gaze that almost froze our blood and filled us with chagrin.

The steam team was smoking and snorting. Two horses were tied behind it, and the steam team was going, leading the horses behind.

"Who is that?" cried Brass. "I see two men in the wagon."

"It's Frank and Jesse James!" I cried, pausing for a single moment to level my field glass on them.

"They have stolen the steam team," roared Brass.

"Captured our team!" and poor Buttons wrung his hands in agony as he saw them going faster and faster.

Already the horses tied on behind had to go in a gallop to keep up with the steam horses.

"Why, really that is a very extraordinary occurrence," said a familiar voice, and Prof. Drydust who had been taking a quiet nap on the ground rose to his feet. "Quite an extraordinary occurrence. The steam team captured! Let me write that down in my journal."

CHAPTER VII.

JESSE AND FRANK.

ALMOST beside himself at losing our steam team, Brass could stand no more from the taunting professor, and he yelled:

"I'll put you out of the way."

Click, click!

He had actually raised his rifle, and though he afterward declared it was only his intention to frighten him, I have always been of the opinion that he really would have shot him.

But old the professor was really too busily engaged on his journal to realize any danger.

"Brass, come on," I cried, "we have no time to waste with him."

"I half believe he is in with them," roared Brass.

"See, there are only two men near the steam team. The other members of the band are gone away, I am now quite certain."

"Those two are Frank and Jesse James."

"Yes."

"Have you ever seen them?"

"I have," I answered.

"And you know them?"

"Yes."

We were all three running toward the steam team as rapidly as we could.

Jesse James' portly form could be seen sitting on the seat, and he had the reins in his hands.

He had hardly got the hang of the thing yet, and was running it badly.

"Come on, boys," I cried, "he won't run it far until we shall have them."

"Why," roared Brass, "they are going faster than we can."

"But he don't know how to manage it."

"No, he don't."

A whistle sounded.

"It was blown by mistake," I cried. "He don't know how to manage it."

"See, he lets more power on one horse than the other."

"Ha, there will be a balk."

"They are slowing up."

We were greatly encouraged at this. Somehow we had no thought of danger, save the danger of losing our steam team, and we ran at the top of our speed toward the steam team, which was certainly running slower.

Siroc and Jim Malone had no trouble in keeping up, and in fact they went around on the opposite side of the wagon seeming to have no fear of the steam horses.

In our mad haste we did not observe what Frank James was about.

Jesse sat on the seat a conspicuous figure, and I was thinking very strongly about trying a shot at him when a wreath of white smoke suddenly curled up from the wagon, and a two-pound cannon ball came whizzing so close to my head that for a moment I staggered and hardly knew whether my head was blown off my shoulders or not.

I staggered, and in a moment Brass was at my side.

"Frank, are you hit?" he cried.

"Where are you struck?" Buttons asked.

"I don't know."

I shook my head.

"Look, Brass, where is he hit?"

"On the head."

I shook my head.

"No, his head's whole."

"Then where did it strike him?"

"I am not hit at all," I answered.

"Didn't the ball strike you?"

"No."

"Good."

"We are all right now."

"There are only two of them," I cried, "and they are in rifle range, can't you bring them down?"

"How about Siroc?"

"Never mind Siroc."

"Both fired."

"Ha, see them dodge."

"The James Boys have learned the value of those bullet proof suits," I answered.

"But we can keep 'em down."

"Yes."

"Fire again!"

Three shots rang out.

"Now, boys, every time you catch sight of a head pull away at it! I am going to the team."

By this time the Steam Team had almost come to a standstill. It was in reality going at a slow walk.

"We'll do it, Frank," Brass said.

"You are both good shots."

"You bet we are."

"And your sixteen-shot rifles will enable you to shoot without having to reload."

"Trust us," put in Buttons.

My position, I knew, was a very dangerous one, but I resolved to do my very best. I have ran many narrow risks in my life, and have at last come to the conclusion that the safest plan is always the boldest. I did on this occasion what might seem rash.

I ran right toward the Steam Team.

Jesse and Frank James were both within that metal-sided wagon, both cool, and both desperate shots. I knew this, and I knew that I was unprotected out on the prairie.

But I had two faithful marksmen.

"Shoot at every head that peeps over the side!" had been my order, and I knew that order would be fulfilled to the letter.

I ran nearer and nearer. Soon something dark began to appear over the rim of the wagon bed.

Crack!

A shot rung out behind.

Down went the dark something, and I could have sworn the bullet had bored it through.

But a few paces were between me and my coveted steam team.

But what means this?

The team suddenly quickens its pace.

Can it be that Jesse James had found out the secret of running the steam team, and keeping his head below the bed.

I ran at the top of my speed, and by putting forth my utmost strength was soon near enough to lay my hand on the side of the wagon above one of the wheels.

"Frank Reade—Frank Reade," cried a chuckling, exulting voice inside.

"Jesse James, I'll have you yet."

"Ha, ha, this a splendid invention of yours, Frank Reade."

"Villain, give it up."

"We are in no hurry."

Then I tried to get a sight of one of them, but both kept close.

I looked back at my companions.

Brass and Buttons were running their best to catch up with the vehicle.

A wild and desperate plan now entered my mind.

The situation was desperate, and it required a desperate remedy.

My wagon was so constructed that the top of the bed came out over the wheels.

The hubs were protected by flat pieces of steel extending out over them, and my plan was to cling to the underside of the wagon and work my way around until I got on the opposite side where the horses were, mount one of them, cut both loose, and shoot down both of the James Boys.

The steam team was now going at a rate of speed which required all my strength and speed to keep up with them. I ran as I had never run before nor since.

I had no way to communicate my plans and designs to my companions.

They were both coming after us as rapidly as they could. I held to the wagon with one hand and turning, I waved my rifle in the air and dropped it. Of course I could not use it in this enterprise, and I dropped it, beckoning them to pick it up and bring it with them.

A wild shout was my only answer.

I was now ready for my very deperate adventure.

I leaped upon the side of the wagon, clinging under the sides by small handles which I had placed under there.

It was as much as my life was worth, for a single slip or misstep and I would fall to the ground and be crushed to death beneath those ponderous wheels.

But I have always been noted as an athlete. I have a steady nerve, a true eye and very sure footed.

I clung on like grim death, for the speed was increasing every moment, and now Siroc and Jim Malone had all they could do to keep up to the steam team.

"Jesse!" I heard Frank call.

"Ay, ay!" Jesse answered.

"Are you getting the hang of it?"

"Yes."

"Is it hard to control?"

"No."

"Difficult to understand?"

"It's very simple."

"A wonderful machine, isn't it, Jesse?"

"You are right, Frank James; it is certainly the most wonderful piece of machinery that has ever been made."

"What will we do with it, now that we have got it?"

"We will have to wreck it, unless we use it to run down teams."

"We can't do it, Jess."

"No."

"I think the thing will be almost useless to us."

"I tell you what we can do."

"What?"

"Take it to our rendezvous."

"Our hiding-place?"

"Yes."

"Could we get it in?"

"The cavern?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

"It's larger than our horses."

"We can take it to pieces."

"So we can."

"Oho! so this is your plan," thought I, as I clung to the underneath side of the wagon, holding on for dear life. "I will, in all probability, spoil your very neat little game."

Then I glanced back at my companions.

We were leaving them so far behind that they looked like specks on the prairie.

Jesse James at this moment said:

"Frank, look over the side and see if you can see them."

Frank was in a moment gazing over the very side of the wagon under which I was clinging for dear life.

"Do you see them?"

"I see two."

"Only two?"

"That's all."

"Where is Frank Reade?"

"He is not one of them."

"Been thrown down or run over?"

"I guess that's so, for one man carries two guns."

"Are they still running this way?"

"Yes."

"But we are out of range, are we not?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll mount the seat."

"Jess, can you manage it down there?"

"Yes. He's got a pair of windows here through which I can see."

"He fixed that to screen himself from our bullets."

"Yes."

"Ha, ha, ha, and we've got it."

"Fools build houses, and wise men live in them."

"And you mean also to say that fools invent machinery, and wise men use it."

"That's it, exactly."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I felt no little chagrin at this. Jesse and Frank James were adding insult to my injury, and I was almost furious with rage.

But I did not lose my presence of mind.

I try to manage, whatever may happen, to keep my senses about me.

I made several efforts to get around on the other side, but found it utterly impossible. A bat gifted with the powers of flying and sticking to nothing, could not have performed that quite impossible feat while the vehicle was plunging along over the uneven ground at a rate of speed that was amazing.

"Jess," said Frank.

"Well."

"Can you see from where you are?"

"Yes."

"Can you see the horses?"

"No."

"Well, you'd better slow up."

"I had forgotten Siroc and Jim Malone."

"Poor fellows, they can't keep pace with Frank Reade's metal steeds."

"No."

The team began to slow up, and as it did so, I began to have some hope. If they would only come to a standstill but for a moment, I might slip around on the other side and mount one of the horses.

Oh, to be once astride of Siroc, many a horse jockey would give a fortune for that privilege, and no horse jockey ever more strongly desired that pleasure than did I at that moment.

"Take your seat, Jesse."

"All right."

"The coast is clear."

"I could hear Jesse James climbing up from the front part of the vehicle to my seat."

Though the steam team was not running so fast as it had been, the great wheels were still revolving at a tremendous rate, and it would have been dangerous to attempt to climb around the rear end of the vehicle.

"The coast is clear," I heard Jesse say.

"Do you see any of them?"

"Not a soul."

"Nor I."

"We have left all out of sight."

Then came a short silence, and Jesse said:
 "Frank, we can use this after all."
 "How?"
 "To bring off Louisa."
 "Louisa Allen, the heiress?"
 "Yes."
 "Jesse are you going to persist in that mad notion?"
 "What mad notion?"
 "Marrying Louisa Allen."
 "Yes, why not?"
 "She is Bob Allen's daughter."
 "I know it."
 "And she is very rich."
 "What of that," laughed Jesse. "Don't I need a rich wife?"
 "But she don't know."
 "Don't know what?"
 "Don't know that we are robbers."
 "H. M. H. M. I suppose not, we are not going around just now telling people that we are lifting purses on the highway, robbing stage coaches, banks and railway trains, nor sacking cities."
 "No, and when she finds out."
 "Needn't ever find it out."
 "But she will," said Frank.
 "How."
 "In some way. In a hundred ways which I can't begin to enumerate."
 "Well, Frank, I've made up my mind."
 "You have?"
 "Yer."
 "For sure?"
 "For sure."
 "Then it's not worth while to try to change you, Jesse, for when your mind is made up it is made up."
 "Yes, you are right."
 "But I wish you would give this mad idea up."
 "What mad idea?"
 "Marriage."
 "How about Annie Ralston," laughed Jesse.
 "Why, I have kept nothing concealed."
 "Does she know you are a robber?"
 "Yes."
 "And will she marry you, a bandit?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, Frank, she is an extraordinary woman."

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE MUD.

"CAN it be possible," I thought, "that the James Boys have their love affairs."

In fact, I was so much interested in their conversation that I had almost forgotten my own critical position.

Though Jesse had slacked up the speed of the Steam Team, it was still running so fast that the horses, Siroc and Jim Malone, had to go at a gallop.

Seeing that my original plan was sure to fail, I was debating in my own mind whether I had better hang on to the rings or hand holds I had or let go and fall to the ground.

While the fall would have given me a considerable jolt, I have no doubt I could have thrown myself far enough out from the wheels to have escaped being crushed.

But I became interested in what the bandits were saying, and though I had to strain every nerve to do it, I clung on to the rings with all the powers I had.

I was growing very tired, my hands and feet were almost exhausted, but I reasoned that if I could but hold on until night I would be near when they stopped and might capture Jesse and Frank alone and single-handed.

True, it was a desperate scheme, but I was hard driven, and willing to take desperate chances. Besides, I wanted to hear what Jesse and Frank James had to say among themselves. They supposed they were alone, and would of course talk freely to each other.

"Yes, Jesse, Annie Ralston is a remarkable woman," Frank answered.

"She is. You say she knows that you are an outlaw?"

"Yes."

"And yet she does not reject you?"

"No."

"She must indeed be a grand girl."

"She is. Oh, Annie is a noble girl."

"But, Frank, how about the old man Ralston?"

"He will marry."

"Of course—I heard that he had forbidden you to come to the home."

At this Frank James laughed and said:
 "Who ever heard of a lover heeding such a command?"

"Well, Frank, you'll get along all right. But I don't know about the Winstons' affair."

"The train we are to rob?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, let's do it."
 "Can't we with this machine?"
 "How?"
 "Run down the train!"
 "Jesse, are you watching which way we are going?"
 "Of course."
 "Seems to me we are out of the road."
 "It was now growing late. The sun had set, and we would soon have it quite dark."
 "Sun has set, Frank."
 "Yes—where are we going to stop to-night?"
 "I don't know."
 "I suppose we can camp anywhere with this rig."
 "It's going slower."
 "What's the matter, Jess?"
 "I don't know. I've put on all the power I can."
 "The machinery must be wrong."
 "Seems like the thing was about run down."
 "That's just it."
 "What's just it?"
 "It's about run down."
 Jesse and Frank were now both at the seat, watching the metal steeds stepping slowly yet with dignity over the ground.
 Siroc and Jim Malone could now keep up with perfect ease, and occasionally they made short halts to pick the grass that grew in abundance all along the way.
 "What do you mean by being run down?" Frank James at last asked.
 "I mean that we are about out of steam. Our fire has run out."
 "Is that so?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, let's stop and fire up."
 "It was growing dark so rapidly that all the landscape was now enwrapped in the sable cloak of night."
 "Let us go down into the low lands," said Jesse. "I think I can throw on a little more power, and as it is down grade we will make it!"
 "All right."
 Jesse had learned a little something about managing the machine, though he was as yet an unsafe driver. He turned the vehicle a little to the right, clapped on all the power, and it sped down grade at a rate of speed which put Jim Malone and Siroc to their swiftest gallop.
 "Now," I thought, "my trial has come. Soon I will be pitted against both Jesse and Frank James, two of the worst men who ever handled a pistol."
 "It goes at a good rate now," said Frank.
 "Yes, but it is only because it is down grade. I doubt if we have enough steam to go up a hill."
 "You ought to know, Jesse; you have been an engineer."
 "Yes; if I had never been an engineer I could not have run this thing."
 "It must be very complicated."
 "It is."
 On we thundered.
 Soon I felt the grass and marshy bushes come swishing by me.
 The wheels began to sink, and I could hear the feet of the horses and the feet of the metal steeds splashing in the water.
 "Hello!" cried Jesse.
 "What's the matter?"
 "Mud."
 "Are we in mud?"
 "In a swamp."
 "There."
 The steam team came to a standstill.
 "We're stuck."
 "Stalled!"
 Then a few moments more of silence, and Frank said:
 "How are we to get out of this?"
 Jesse was silent for a long time, and then he said:
 "I don't know, Frank, but really I have almost come to the conclusion that it don't make no difference anyway."
 "What don't make any difference anyway?"
 "Whether we get out of here or not?"
 "Oh, we don't want to be stuck here in the mud all the time."
 "No, nor are we going to be. But this thing is our worst enemy. If we can get it stuck in the mud, all right."
 "I see."
 "Good idea, ain't it?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, shall we go now?"
 "Why not make our night out in this wagon?"
 "In the wagon?"

"Yes."
 "Well, why not?"
 After a few moments' silence Jesse James said:
 "It will be a pity, though, to leave Siroc and Jim Malone in the mud and water all night."
 "Well, it will."
 "What'll we do with them?"
 There was another interval of silence, broken at last by Jesse James saying:
 "I believe we'll have to take them out on the hill."
 "A good idea."
 "But do we dare?"
 "Dare what?"
 "Sleep so far away from our horses. This thing is powerless."
 "Yes, so it is."
 Then they both seemed to be pondering on the question.
 At last Frank cried:
 "But we've got no pursuers near. The boys have gone back into Missouri and everybody will think we went with them unless Frank Reade and him men—"
 At this Jesse laughed:
 "They are fifty miles behind."
 "Then we'll risk our horses up on the hill."
 From this moment my plan of action was clear. I would steal Siroc, go back, hunt my companions and we would capture Frank and Jesse while they slept.
 It was a wild, desperate scheme; but I like desperate chances.
 The James Boys seemed to entertain no fear whatever of any possible harm. They evidently thought that no one was within miles.
 My hands and feet were growing numbed, with the long strain upon them; and I knew I could not hold on to it much longer.
 At last Jesse and Frank sprang on their horses and rode away up the hill.
 It was now dark, quite dark, and I let go my hold after releasing my foot from the ring and fell partly on the grass and partly in the muddy water.
 A kind of a coarse marsh grass grew on this bottom land, and in places the tussocks were above the water and mud.
 Fortunately my fall was noiseless, or the quick ears of the James Boys might have heard it.
 I lay perfectly still for several moments, then was beginning to consider how I was to get out of there, when I heard Frank and Jesse returning, after having left their horses in the grove above.
 "We'll get our feet wet crossing the lagoon," said Frank.
 "No we won't."
 "Why, it's all water."
 "Here is a ship that is above the water."
 "How the mischief did we run so far into the mud before we found out what we were doing?" Frank asked.
 "The thing was under headway," said Jesse, and couldn't be stopped.
 "Well, it's stopped now."
 "Yes."
 "And it will never go on, for I don't believe there is any power that can get that machine out of the mud."
 "It is certainly stuck fast enough for the time being at least."
 "They'll never get it out."
 This thought troubled me not a little.
 How was I to get my wonderful machine out of the mud?
 "Follow me right along this strip of high land, Frank," Jesse said. "Keep well to the right and you will come right up at the right side of the steam team."
 "All right."
 "It's easy enough, isn't it?"
 "Yes."
 They were coming nearer; they were right at the wagon, and when they halted by the side of it, I could not but tremble. I had my revolver in my hand, but I hardly dared trust it in the darkness. For a moment the wild plan of assaulting both myself entered my mind. But my soul revolted at the idea of killing, unless absolutely compelled to do so, and I resolved to adopt the safer plan of going for my two companions.
 "Well, here we are," said Jesse at last, and they climbed in the wagon.
 "I am tired," Frank answered, as he climbed in also.
 "I am hungry."
 "So am I."
 "Have we nothing to eat?"
 "Not a bite. I am hungry enough to eat some of those croaking toads out there in the pond."

"So could I."
 "But what can't be cured must be endured."
 Then a short silence ensued, broken at last by Jesse saying:
 "Maybe those fellows have some grub in this car?"
 "That's it. Frank Reade is too good a traveler to go without an ample supply of grub."
 "I know it."
 "Jess, light your lantern and make search."

In a few moments I could catch the occasional gleam of a lantern as it flashed over the sides of the car.

"Now is my time," I thought. "While they are engaged in hunting for something to eat I will get out of here."

I began crawling as noiseless as a shadow over the ground.

Slowly and cautiously, fearing that an accidental dip or splash in the water would betray me, or that an unlucky flash of Jesse's lantern might make me the target for the unerring aim of the James Boys. It seemed that I had gone miles before I reached the solid shore, but at last I made it.

Then I rose to my feet and looked back. Whereas I had before been horrified at the great distance, I was now alarmed at the steam team being so near.

It seemed that I could put out my hand, and almost touch the captured machine.

I sighed as I thought that my property and my pride was now in possession of an enemy, and made a mental resolution that I would have it back if it was in the power of human kind to get it back.

I did not wait long by the brink of the marsh, but crept away up the hillside as rapidly as I dared in the direction of the horses.

Then as I went toward them another fear came to my heart. This fear was produced by hearing an uneasy snif of the air.

Siroc and Jim Malone had winded me, and in order to succeed I must get, as the sailors say, to leeward, or where the wind blew from them to me.

I made a short half circuit, and thus came to the proper point, when I began again to advance.

There was danger yet.

Siroc and Jim Malone owned but one master each, and a stranger might be resented with bites, kicks and squeals.

I was right in my conjectures, for when I suddenly came along, Jesse's famous horse began neighing and kicking like a mad beast.

"Hello, do you hear that, Jess?" cried Frank.

"Yes, there's trouble there."

"They don't neigh for nothing."

"Come on."

There was not a moment to lose. I am a skilled horseman, and, despite Siroc's wild squeals and kicks, I leaped on his back and went speeding away like the wind.

I took the trouble to cut Jim Malone's halter, and the poor beast, frightened and confused, followed Siroc for two miles before he discovered his mistake, and then, suddenly stopping, he turned about and trotted back to the James Boys.

Mine was an unwilling steed, but by my superior management I managed to keep him in the right course, and went thundering over the prairie more rapidly than I ever rode before on the back of a horse.

It was nearly midnight when a light in the distance attracted my attention.

I rode cautiously toward it. I was not long in making it out to be a camp-fire, and I could see one or more tall figures moving about sometimes between me and the light.

I cautiously approached the light, and when I was near enough to see distinctly, I made out three men sitting, standing or walking about the camp-fire.

One was Brass, one was Buttons, and the third tall, angular, ungainly personage, with long hair and hatchet face, there could be no doubt about being the professor.

A mule was grazing near. A sheepskin saddle and a rope bridle were near the tall, lean, cadaverous man.

I recognized the mule as the very animal which had thrown the professor off his back when we rescued him from the James Boys.

"Well, my friends," the professor was saying in his sanctimonious way, "it is a very sad affair. Indeed, it is very sad. I have been very much grieved over the singular taking off of Mr. Reade, who is a very estimable young man, and I have written my thoughts down in my journal. Mr. Reade had many good qualities and among his best points is that he keeps a diary."

"I don't believe Frank is dead," said Brass.

"Chances are against him," sighed Buttons.
 "What mad freak possessed him to cling as he did to the side of the wagon in which the James Boys were."

I wanted to hear no more, but urging Siroc into the circle of the camp-fire light, I cried:

"Well, here I am!"

They all started to their feet, each with an exclamation of wonder, and Brass came very near to shooting me before he made out who I was.

"It's I, my real self," I explained. "Don't be alarmed. I will not harm you."

"Where have you been?" asked Brass.

"Taking a ride with the James Boys."

"Where is the steam team?"

"In the mud."

CHAPTER IX.

A FRIENDLY FLASH.

THEN I explained in as few words as possible the condition in which I had left the steam team.

"And they captured it and run it in the mud," said Professor Drydust, slowly, writing the event in his journal.

"Yes."

"Well, Frank, if they know of your escape we'll either not find them there or they will be waiting for a fight," said Buttons.

"I think you are right."

"We want a fight," put in Brass.

"Well, boys, what shall we do?" I asked.

"Let's go on to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am willing."

"How far is it?" asked Buttons.

"I think twenty miles."

"Great guns—a twenty mile tramp."

"We have the horse and can take it time about riding."

"And my mule, gentlemen, my mule, remember."

"Professor Drydust, how did you get your mule?"

"Oh, Jerry is a most noble animal, and I knew he would follow me. You could hardly lose him from me."

"And has he followed you all the time?"

"Yes, sir. He's been ever near."

"What say you to making an immediate move on the enemy," I asked.

"All right—we'll do it."

In a moment we were all ready for breaking camp.

I was somewhat rested and offered Brass my horse while Buttons mounted the wall.

"Now we'll move rapidly as Napoleon always did, and strike them in a mass."

We hurried over the ground as rapidly as we could, and for two hours traveled in silence.

Then we changed.

It was long after daylight before we came in full view of the steam team. There it still stood stuck in the mud.

"How are we to get it out," said Brass.

At this moment there came a shot from a distant grove, and a bullet grazed my cheek.

"The James Boys," I cried.

I was mounted on Siroc when the shot was fired, and that animal became almost ungovernable.

"Hold him steady," said the professor.

"Frank, get down," cried Brass.

"Yes, you make too good a shot up there."

I realized what was said, when a moment later two bullets passed through my hat and another cut a round hole through the collar of my coat.

After a fourth had plowed a little furrow in my shoulder I dismounted.

A wild shrill whistle rang out on the air. The whistle is far beyond my powers of description. It was half whistle and half cry, and had a most peculiar effect on Siroc.

Before we could comprehend that it was the call of a beloved master for his horse, Siroc had squatted to the earth, given one tremendous bound which snapped the rein I held in my hand and was away.

Tossing his head and kicking up his heels, he squealed with delight and flew at the speed of the wind to the grove where his master was.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" rang out a wild demoniac laugh. "You thought to steal my Siroc from me, did you?"

"Well, did you ever?"

"Not in my day."

"It's remarkable."

"Beats anything I ever saw."

These were some of the expressions uttered by Buttons and Brass. Even Professor Drydust was for a moment held speechless and silent in wonder. At last, however, he regained his

speech, and, dipping his pencil between his lips, he said:

"A wonderful horse, truly a very wonderful horse. I must write that down in my journal."

"Down, all of you, and be ready for a charge," I cried, as soon as I could speak. My brave lads obeyed me, and with cocked rifles we all three crouched on the grass ready to send death to the James Boys.

I should have stated that Brass had secured my rifle which I had dropped and brought it to the camp for me.

The professor finished recording some gem of thought which had come to his mind, and then putting the precious document carefully away in a capacious inside pocket he seized his long barreled rifle and lay down on the grass by the side of us.

But the James Boys had no notion of fighting us it seemed. They knew perhaps that our long range guns gave us an advantage, for Jesse and Frank seldom burdened themselves with rifles. They were too large and clumsy to suit their purposes.

"There they come!" cried Brass.

They rode out on the top of the hill and waving their hats at us galloped away.

"Well, now may I be hung for a traitor for treason and spoils, if I don't think that a shabby trick," cried Brass.

"They are gone," said I.

Yes, and left us in the mud."

"Stuck fast."

I arose and watched them as they galloped away until they became two specks in the horizon.

Then we turned to the Steam Team.

"How are we going to get out of the swamp," Buttons asked.

"That's a question."

"Boys let's fire up, get up steam and try to pull through," I suggested.

We went down to the machine and found the metal steeds in mud and water far above their knees and the wheels had sunk several inches in the soft earth.

"Now, lads, I'll try to put on steam enough to move it, but I am afraid that it is useless."

I built a fire in each furnace and in a few moments we had the steam hissing. When the boilers had about all they could bear I turned it on. Slow at first, but more and more until the legs and feet of the metal horses began to move.

I put on more power.

The vehicle moved, but only deeper in the mud. The feet and legs splashed and kicked and kicked and floundered until I was convinced that it was useless to put any more power on and turned off the steam.

"We'll never get out that way," I said.

At this moment we heard a shout or a report like a pistol on the hill.

"Get up, buck, woa, haw, yer blamed rascal."

The shout was the yell of a driver of a long team of oxen, and the report his whip.

"There's a bull whacker," cried Brass.

"How many yoke of cattle has he?"

"Eight."

A new thought came to my mind.

"He must pull us out," I cried, and leaping from the wagon I ran up the hill, shouting:

"Hold, mister. Say, stop your team, won't you?"

"Woa there, Bright 'n Ned. Woa, Buck 'n Beny. Why, howdy mister, wots ther matter?" asked the bull whacker.

"We are stuck."

"Stalled?"

"Yes."

"What kind av a blamed rig 'av yer got, any way," he asked, as he fixed his amazed eyes on the steam team.

"That is a steam team," I explained.

"A what?"

"A steam team."

"Great Scott, yer don't tell me. Why, it's er smokin'. Looks like er ditched locomotive."

"It is stuck in the mud; we want to engage your eight yoke of steers to pull it out."

He scratched his head and said:

"Well, I don't believe I kin."

"Oh, yes, try. I'll give you twenty-five dollars."

"Taint money as iz botherin' av me, mistur, but I'm afeerd my oxen ain't strong enuff, but there's two more teams er commin' an' with them we'll hev twenty four yoke, then mebbe we kin make it."

"How far are they away?"

"Be hyar in 'a hour ef yer kin wait."

"We will have to wait, and I will give all three of you twenty-five dollars each to get us out."

The fellow gave utterance to a loud whistle,

and said it was 'most a month's wages right slap down. Then he unyoked his cattle and allowed them to rest and feed on the grass.

We passed the time as well as we could until the other teams came up.

A few minutes were given them to let their cattle rest.

A bountiful supply of log chains were among the teams, and they soon had a long string of twenty-four yoke of oxen hitched to the Steam Team. Forty-eight great, stout, sturdy beasts, were ready to pull the massive vehicle.

Frank, they may break it," suggested Brass.

"I think not, and besides it is our only hope."

"Hadh't you better get up steam and help back it out?"

It was a good idea. This would prevent the steam horses having legs broken.

They had the oxen hitched to the rear end of the car or wagon, and the long string of cattle extended up over the top of the hill.

When all were ready, I took my place on the seat, and reversing the power, set the machinery in motion.

"Get up!"

"Hoo ay!"

"Whack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

It was a lively scene. The drivers were cracking their whips, and Brass, Buttons and the professor, each with a stick, was belaboring the oxen.

Never had I seen such a sight.

Forty-eight stout oxen, straining every nerve, and the log chains creaking to their utmost.

"Go on, get up!"

"Get up!"

Some of the cattle were down on their knees and others had their toes stuck in the ground, heaving.

The legs and feet of the steam horses were moving, and, to my great joy, I saw the great wheels begin to roll.

"She comes! she comes!" yelled Brass, almost beside himself in his transports of joy.

"Hooray!" cried Buttons, equally elated, while the professor, in his joy, proceeded to write it down in his journal.

There were great clods of mud hanging to the wheels, showing how deeply they had been imbedded.

"Get up!"

"Go on!"

"Heave to it, my beauties!" yelled the bull-whackers, making the air resound with reverberating echoes of whips.

We were now out on solid ground, and I signaled the men to stop.

"Come, get here quick and clean off the mud so we can travel," I called out to my companions.

By the time I had counted out the money to each of the happy teamsters, the wheels and feet of the metal steeds were scraped clean of mud.

"Is anything broken?" Brass asked.

"No, I believe not. I can't tell until we try it. All aboard!"

In a moment every one was on board.

Then I seized the reins and threw open the valves.

With shouts the metal horses began to step off.

"All is right," I cried, and in a few moments we were flying away across the prairie at lightning speed, leaving the three amazed teamsters gazing after us.

"Have you noticed how late it is?" asked Brass.

"No, it's cloudy."

"You are right, and it's going to rain."

I took out my watch, and discovered to my amazement it was five o'clock.

"What, is it possible we have spent the entire day here at this?" I asked.

"I guess it is."

"Well, where will we camp?"

That was a question we found it not easy to settle. We allowed our horses to run on, hoping to come to some house.

But night came on, and we had reached no place yet. The James Boys had destroyed our provisions, and we were hungry.

"I'll turn on the electric headlights," I said, "and we'll travel, even if it is night."

Then I touched the spring, but to my amazement all was darkness yet.

The team was rushing on in the darkness at a tremendous rate.

"Why don't you turn it on?" Brass cried.

"It won't turn."

"Broker?"

"Out of order some way."

Then I tried again with some effect.

"How dark it is," cried Buttons.

"Yea."

The thunder rolled above us, and the lightning at this moment flashed.

Great Heaven! how I started. There right before us was a precipice fully two hundred feet deep, revealed by the friendly flash.

I reversed my engine, put on the brakes, and stopped when on the very verge of the precipice.

CHAPTER X.

PROFESSOR DRYDUST HAS SOME DIVERSION.

THE lightning's flash was gone, and we were enveloped in total darkness, save the dull glow from the furnace.

For a moment a horrified silence held us all dumb.

So near to death—and such an awful death it would have been!—was enough to freeze us to silence.

The first to regain his speech was Brass, and he, in a tone that was as calm and unconcerned as if he had not been on the brink of an awful death, said:

"I wonder if you couldn't back out of this, Frank? I don't believe I would try to go any further."

I laughed. I could not help it, for he was so droll and cool that it was impossible for me to restrain my risibles.

"I don't believe I'll try it, Brass."

"Well, I wonder if we can back?" put in Buttons.

At this moment another voice put in, which I recognized full well. It said:

"Most extraordinary affair indeed! A very thrilling adventure, and but for the friendly flash of lightning we might all have been dashed to death. I regret that it is too dark to record the event in my journal."

I put on the power with reversed engines, and in a few moments the great iron legs of the horses began pushing backward.

Oh, horror! I felt one slip. Something was loosened, and a moment later I heard a great booming sound like a clap of thunder, as a boulder, loosened from its base, went rolling with a peal like thunder down to the awful blackness and depths below.

But the engines were working, and the metal steed made a tremendous effort and righted himself.

One inclined to be superstitious would almost think that the steam team was gifted with powers of reason.

We were in a few moments at a safe distance, and then I stopped.

"What are you going to do now, Frank?" asked Brass.

"I am going to see what is wrong with our head-lights."

"A good idea."

"Brass, light a lantern."

"By George, why haven't I thought of this before?"

"Yes, and I can finish my journal."

"Confound your journal!"

"Oh, dear—oh, dear! Now Mr. Reade wouldn't say that."

The lantern was lighted, and I climbed out of the car. By the aid of the powerful lantern, I could see how nearly we had been on the brink of destruction, and I shuddered.

Where one iron foot had been the embankment was broken away and gone.

It was my policy to treat the matter as lightly as possible, so I said nothing and assumed the jocose air of Brass.

"If we had gone any further we would have needed a flying machine," I said to my companions.

"We would have taken a tumble in lieu of one," answered Brass.

I went to the front rigging, and opening some of the head gearing of the metal horses discovered that the wire by which the electric head lights were attached had slipped and failed to make any connection.

In a moment's time I had it back in place and we were all right.

The wire had no doubt slipped while we were backing and pulling out of the mud.

"Have you got it all right?" asked Brass.

"Yes."

"Suppose I turn on the head light?"

"You may."

"Well, here goes."

And the two powerful lights which steamed far out into the darkness lighting up the awful abyss beyond streamed out before us.

"All right, it works all right now," cried Brass.

"Ah, it's all right."

Then I ran back and climbed aboard, taking the reins in my hands.

"Ah, it is beautiful, beautiful indeed," cried the eccentric professor. "Please hold the lantern so I can see, Mr. Brass, and I'll give a description of it in my journal."

"Can't you find some other diversion?" asked Brass.

"Diversion, Mr. Brass, why yes, that's a good word and now I'll write that down in my book."

"Oh never mind, I think you might have some other amusement."

"Yes, so do I, and now as I come to think of it, diversion is what I want most; I am sadly in need of diversion."

"That is what we are seeking ourselves."

"I trust we will find it."

"The James Boys are our chief diversion, and I believe we can spare some of it with you."

"Quite generous."

I had backed the team several rods away from the dangerous precipice and starting out in a circuit we was soon turned out of the dangerous path thundering through grass and hazel bushes.

There was no danger now of running down a precipice for our powerful head lights threw out a light, far, far ahead of us.

At last we came into a sort of a dim road but it was sufficient to suit our purposes and we went thundering along it at a rapid rate of speed.

Along we sped, the metal steeds tireless and no doubt looking terrible to one who was unacquainted with them.

As we were being whirled along at such a tremendous rate of speed, I could not help thinking of the conversation I had overheard between Frank and Jesse James, and to myself I kept asking:

"Who is Louisa Allen, the daughter of Bob Allen, and who is this Annie Ralston?"

Brass and Buttons were really both as much in the dark in regard to the matter as I, I knew, for neither had ever been in Missouri or Kansas before.

Suddenly a lucky thought entered my head.

Maybe the professor knew.

Slowing up the team a little, I called:

"Professor!"

No answer.

"Professor Drydust!"

I thought I heard him snore.

"The old chap's asleep," answered Brass.

"Wake him."

"No, let him sleep, for now we have some peace from his abominable journal."

"But I want to ask him some important questions!"

"All right, if you say it."

Then he shook the professor, saying:

"Wake up, you old rascal."

"Oh, ah, eh! What'll you have, gentlemen—a new thought?"

"No—the boss wants to talk with you."

"Talk with me?"

"Yes."

"What does he want to say?"

"Are you awake?" I called.

"Yes, sir."

"Come over here in the seat at my side."

"Oh, yes, I guess he wants me to read my journal to while away the tedious hours as we glide along. Quite an intelligent young man, and he knows how to pass the time to an advantage too."

"I beg pardon," I said.

"Eh?"

"We won't need that."

"What?"

"The journal."

"Won't need the journal?"

"I assure you not."

"You may be mistaken."

"I simply want to ask you a few questions, that is all."

"A few questions? Well, I may need my journal."

"You will not."

"What do you want to ask?"

"Have you lived long in Missouri?"

"Twelve years, sir. I can tell the very day I came there by referring to—"

"No, you need not," I interrupted, as he began turning over the leaves in his journal. "I only want you to approximate, you need not go to the trouble of ascertaining the very day. Have you been much in Kansas?"

"Yes, sir. My duty as a teacher of the young has taken me in many places in the country."

"So you are pretty well acquainted in both States?"

"I am."

"Now, I want to ask you about some people."

"Who?"

"Do you know Ralston?"

"Colonel Ralston?"

"I suppose so. Has he a daughter?"

"Oh, yes."

"What's her name?"

"Annie, Annie Ralston."

"Annie Ralston is one of the people I am inquiring about."

"Well, she is the romantic young girl who has fallen in love with Frank James. Her father has driven Frank from the house, and threatens to arrest him if he comes near the house again."

"Does she know he is a robber?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, we'll let her go. If she will go to destruction there is no help for her."

"That's just what I say. I've got it in my--"

"But there is another person I want to inquire about."

"Who?"

"Allen."

"I know a number of Allens."

"Do you know Bob Allen?"

"Of Kansas?"

"I don't know which State he lives in, but it must be either in Missouri or Kansas."

"Guess it is Kansas."

"Do you know a Bob Allen?"

"Yes."

"Has he a daughter?"

"Three."

"Do you know their names?"

"Well, I should. They all three were my pupils. Yes, sir, all three attended school to me and I know them."

"Well, give me their names."

"Isabella, Araminta and Louisa."

"Which is youngest?"

"Louisa."

"How old is she?"

"Not over seventeen."

"Is Bob Allen very rich?"

"Rich?"

"Yes."

"Why, he is worth millions. He is the great cattle king of the West."

"Then I am on the right track."

"What do you mean?"

"How near does Allen live to the Missouri line?"

"Within a dozen miles."

"It's he."

"Who?"

"I mean she."

"What do you mean, Mr. Reade?"

"Are the Allens your friends?"

"Yes."

"Well, they are in great danger, especially the young girl Louisa."

"Why, my dear sir, that is alarming. What—what do you mean. Pray, let me record the fact in my journal, so it will not be forgotten."

"No, it will not be forgotten."

"Then what are we to do?"

"This is a very delicate matter, Professor Drydust, and you must leave the matter somewhat in my hands."

"What is it?"

"Well, to begin with, you see Miss Louisa has been woefully deceived."

"Deceived?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Jesse W. James."

"Oh, you mistake. She has not the honor of that gentleman's acquaintance."

"I beg your pardon. She has. She knows him not by his real name, but by an assumed name."

"Is that so?"

"It certainly is."

"Who is your informant?"

"Jesse W. James himself."

"What, have you been talking to him?"

"No."

"How did he tell you, then?"

"He did not tell me. While I was clinging to the side of the wagon, when the steam team was captured by the James Boys, I heard him tell Frank James that he was going to marry Louisa."

"What?"

"It is true!"

"Why, she don't know him."

"No, not as Jesse James, for he has done all his courting under another name."

"Well, he's a villain, that's what I have to say of him, and I shall write him down as such."

"Can you direct us to Allen's house?" I in-

terrupted, for I did not care to hear any further harangue about his abominable journal.

"I am, as soon as it is daylight."

"That will do then, you may go back to your nap. I don't care to talk with you any more for awhile."

He went back to his place and was soon asleep.

He was puzzled what to do. It had begun to rain and we were in the open country. We came at last to a wooded road.

Ere long our head lights showed us a field.

A little further and we came to an old log house which had been abandoned. The fences had been taken down from around it and it had been occupied by hogs.

The swine were sneaking away as we came in sight.

There was a long high porch or shed, for it was built on the old Virginia style of houses, and we ran in under this to pass the night.

As we stopped Professor Drydust yawned, and looking about, rubbed his eyes and growled:

"Oh, oh, I wish I could have some kind of diversion."

"Diversion?" cried Brass.

"Yes."

"What kind of diversion?"

"Anything to stir up my stagnant blood."

"This cold rain makes you chilly."

"Slightly."

"If the James Boys gang should be near, you might have some diversion."

"Oh, would I?"

"Very likely."

"I wish they were."

The words were scarce out of his mouth ere: Crack! went a pistol, and a ball whizzed close to the professor's head.

"Hello!" yelled the professor.

A wild yell put an end to anything further he might have uttered.

"The James Boys!" I cried, and turned off the electric headlights.

Crack!

Crack!

The shots were poured in on us.

"Out with the lights, Brass! Put out the lantern!" I shouted. "See, we are being made the target for their broadside."

"All right."

In a moment the lights were put out, and then commenced one of the most stubborn fights I have ever witnessed.

The banditti in full force charged us so close that we could see their faces by the flash of their pistols. We had some double-barreled shotguns and poured our fire in on them.

Then went at them with revolvers and drove them back.

During a temporary lull in the fight Brass, who even in the midst of danger seemed bubbling over with mischief, turned to Professor Drydust and asked:

"Are you getting all the diversion you want?"

CHAPTER XI.

THE STEAM TEAM LOST.

THE storm raged with the fight. The rain poured in torrents, and the pistol balls of the banditti rained all about us like hail.

It was so dark that we could scarcely see. I was crouching behind the corner of the house when, from the whiz of bullets from behind, I was convinced that they had outflanked us.

"Brass!" I called.

"Here!"

"Are you hit?"

"No."

"Where is Buttons?"

"Here."

It was too dark to see my companions and I could only ascertain that they were living by calling to them. I was about to ask for Professor Drydust when a voice which could not be mistaken, said:

"Quite an extraordinary conflict, indeed. Now, if it was only light enough for one to see I would record the memorable events which are now transpiring, in my journal."

Soon after, the flash of a rifle, followed by a yell from one of our enemies, convinced us that Prof. Drydust was doing anything else than writing.

Drydust was a study for me. I never met with a more puzzling character in all my life.

He seemed a fool at times, but he was far from being an idiot. He was brave as a lion, comical as a clown, and shrewd as the shrewdest.

For some time I had come to entertain a suspicion that his journal business was all a humbug, done for effect.

"Frank!" a voice whispered.

It was Brass. I recognized his voice.

"What is it, Brass?"

"I—I have discovered something."

"What?"

"They are making an attack on the Steam Team."

"Are they?"

"Yes."

"Well, Brass, I've got a new plan now."

"What is that?"

"Watch from this corner;" I'm going to turn the lights on."

"He understood what I meant."

"All right, Frank, I'll load both barrels of the shotgun almost fit to burst."

I then crept away in the darkness. It was so dark that we could see nothing, and fired only at the flash of pistols or sounds. Several bullets had whizzed from the backs and sides of the metal steeds, and I knew that the James Boys were under the impression that we were in the wagon.

To approach the steam team was dangerous. But I managed to reach the step, and quick as lightning I leaped up into the wagon.

I lay down just as a volley of shots fired at very close quarters flew over and against the wagon.

Then I began feeling about for the knob to throw on the headlights.

I found it, and touched it.

In a moment a great brilliant light was thrown out far across the field, over the fence and into the road.

We could see the James Boys band in considerable numbers massed to charge upon us.

The dazzling light thrown so suddenly in their faces blinded them, and they threw their hands up to their eyes.

"Now, boys, let them have it," I cried.

Oh, what a yell, and oh, what a volley.

We all fired, and poured in a deadly rain of bullets until they were glad to get out of our way and run for their lives.

They mounted horses, and flew for life.

We knew that some of them were hit, and Buttons, who was of a very sanguine as well as enthusiastic temperament, vowed that he saw some of them lying on the ground badly hurt.

"Frank," said Brass, coming over to my side.

"Well, what, Brass?"

"Hain't we better be going?"

"I don't know."

"They have retreated, but it will not be far. How is the steam?"

"Low."

"I'll fire up."

At this moment we heard the voices of Jesse and Frank James rallying their men in the distance.

"Hurry, Brass."

"Aye, aye."

Brass was an excellent fireman, and he soon had the steam hissing from the boilers.

"All aboard," I whispered, turning off the light and seizing the reins.

"Aye aye," Brass whispered.

"Are we all aboard?"

"Yes."

It was too dark to see, and I was so intently listening to the rallying bandits that I did not hear them as they came aboard.

"All here," Buttons answered.

I reversed and put on a little steam.

"Brass," I called.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Light the lantern and hold it over the back part of the wagon."

"All right."

He did so.

"Now keep a close watch, and if you see danger ahead, or rather behind, let me know," for we were backing out of our dangerous position.

"All right."

"Won't they see the light," whispered Buttons.

"No, the steam team is between them and the light."

It had ceased raining, but the roads were muddy and slippery. The steam horses were so skillfully made that they raised and put down their feet softly when moving slow.

Backward, slowly backward step by step, we moved every moment, increasing the distance between our enemies, and they knowing nothing about it.

In this way we moved backward over a hill and came to a small level bit of ground covered with grass only.

Here I gracefully swung my team around and throwing on the electric light, which lit up the road ahead of us, went flying away from our enemies.

We ran about ten miles and then came to a

halt. We concluded that it would be best to remain on the prairie all night.

So we left one on guard and the others fell asleep.

We were very tired and hungry.

When morning came we saw a little town about five miles away and put our metal horses in motion heading for it. It was not long until we reached it, when we bought and stored away provisions enough to last us several days, perhaps a week or two.

Everybody turned out to see the wonderful steam team. All had heard of it, and everybody wanted to see it.

We remained only an hour in town, and then

"Well, don't put on any more coal. Let the steam die down a little."

"I will."

We had halted near a lonely little grove, and there was a stream of fine cold water boiling out of the stones near. What a lovely place to camp it was.

"Boys, get out; we will all stretch our limbs on the ground," I said.

"All right. I am glad of that," cried Brass.

"My legs are growing round like barrel hoops," growled the professor, as he leaped out on the ground.

"Come, be lively, Brass, spread the cloth,"

calculated to fill any one with amazement if not fear.

The Steam Team was acting strangely.

It seemed that Buttons had made a mistake, and instead of opening the escape valve, he had started the machinery. The horses had lunged forward under the powerful pressure of steam and Buttons who was standing with one foot on the hub guard of the fore wheel, and leaning forward for the purpose of opening the valve lost his hold and fell back upon the ground.

The steam team leaped forward at incredible speed.

I saw the danger and shouted:

"Brass, Brass, stop them!"



Jesse sat on the seat a conspicuous figure, and I was thinking very strongly about trying a shot at him, when suddenly a two-pound cannon ball came whizzing close to my head.

According to the opinion of Professor Drydust, an opinion which he took great pains to record in his journal, we started off in a south eastern direction as the most direct course to Bob Alens.

When it grew late, we came to a halt for dinner.

I had been sleeping, and the driving had been intrusted to Buttons.

Buttons, perhaps, knew less about the machine than any one in our party.

Even Professor Drydust, who would insist on being with us, had some idea of machinery, and he soon learned how to manage the steam team, as the management of it was quite easy, for it was not at all complicated.

When we stopped, Buttons had steam up to the very highest pitch.

"Buttons, what do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't know why you ask me that," he answered.

"Why have you got the fire up so strong?"

"To keep the machine going."

"Well, you've got entirely too much steam on."

"I thought it was about right."

"You'll blow us up one of these days."

"Well, I don't know much about it," he answered.

He need not have said that, for any one could see at a glance that he didn't.

said I. "I will go up on the hill and take a look about to see if the enemy are in sight."

"All right."

"I'll help you," said Drydust.

"Come on, old fellow."

"You'll think I'm not such a bad fellow after all," remarked Drydust, with an effort to conciliate Brass, whom he had come to look upon as a sort of general enemy.

"No, if you would quit talking about your journal."

"Now Mr. Brass, let me argue the point with you. Don't you think that a journal is a pretty good thing after all?"

"Yes, but when one makes it a hobby, it becomes a bore."

I had gone but a few paces up the hill when I saw that the steam was pretty high and turning to Buttons, I said:

"Go and raise the gage and let the steam escape, Buttons. We have too much on."

"All right, I will," he answered.

Then I turned about and went on up the hill.

Reaching the crest I raised my field glasses and swept the horizon far around, but could see no one save a few hunters away to the south about six miles from us.

I was still gazing around in every direction when suddenly I heard a wild yell in the direction of our little camp accompanied by a sudden hissing and snorting.

I wheeled about and the sight was one well

Brass was kneeling down spreading out a cloth on which to put our dinner, and Prof. Drydust was at his side.

"Be quick!" I yelled.

They both started to their feet in a moment, and Brass ran away after the runaways, while Prof. Drydust put his hands to his side, and with his old plug hat well on the back of his head, leaned backward and cried:

"Wo!"

Notwithstanding our position was a decidedly critical one the professor cut such a comical figure that I roared with laughter. I could not help it.

Brass was running at full speed, but what could he do against steam legs and muscles of steel?

"It's no use, Brass!" I called, for I saw he could not catch them.

I ran down to where Buttons lay, just where he had been thrown.

I raised him in my arms and asked:

"Are you hurt?"

There was no answer.

"Buttons—Buttons, can't you speak? Won't you speak?"

But Buttons was still silent.

I raised him higher and laid him on the grass. Drydust, who had not as completely lost his presence of mind as I thought, now came up with a tin cup of water, which he dashed on the face of the insensible man.

He had only had the breath knocked out of his body, and really had no very severe injuries. In a few moments he was all right again.

"Well, he's alive, Mr. Reade; he's not dead!" cried Drydust.

I was now giving all my attention to the run-aways. Like the wind they were speeding across the prairie, and I expected every moment to see them fall and kick themselves to pieces.

But they kept on.

Sometimes one horse struck an ant knoll, which caused it to halt a little, shoving the other ahead, and this caused the machine to turn a little.

I was glad of this, for I saw that they were

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. Reade, what about your steam team?"

"It has run away," I said, pointing across the prairie, where, far in the distance, could be seen the column of smoke rising. "There is where the steam team disappeared," I said.

"Oh, I am so sorry," began Buttons.

"That won't do any good," said the professor, who seemed to have suddenly been changed into quite a different man.

"What are we to do?"

"Why, follow it up. Even a steam horse will run itself down after a while."

Brass, who was not a little astonished at the

"A hundred hopes."

"But the steam team which ran away—disappeared over the hill and is now out of sight. Not even the smoke can be seen," sighed Buttons.

"There are a thousand ways it might stop."

"Tell me one."

"Stick in the mud."

"Yes."

"Upset."

"Not probable."

"Run against a tree."

"That's probable."

"It might be ditched."

"Yes."



I brought the steam team about with the rear of the wagon toward the house, and began slowly backing. "They see us now." "Ay, they do, and by jingo they are all getting on their feet. We have them all round now."

liable soon to get turned apart, and might come toward us again or run around in a circle.

"It's no use," said Brass, returning to us and shaking his head ruefully; "the thing is running away, and there is not a man or beast able to keep up with or overtake it."

"It has on a full head of steam."

"Yes."

"Maybe it will get stuck again," said Professor Drydust.

"No danger of such good luck," said Brass, who was very angry at Buttons.

"It was all Buttons' fault," he growled.

"Never mind—" I began.

"But I do mind."

"Never mind, I say. Buttons could not help it."

"I tell you he could. If Buttons had given the attention to the steam team he ought to have done he would not have allowed it to have on such a bursting head of steam as it did, and then an idiot who doesn't know the distance between an escape valve and a power valve ought to never be allowed to run an engine."

"No; hush. He was hurt, and is just coming to his senses," I said.

We could see the steam team like a speck flying over the prairie. Now it disappears, and we see it no more, but above the horizon a cloud of smoke tells us where it is.

"There, he's all right now. Ain't you all right, Mr. Buttons?" we heard the professor say.

earnest manner of the professor, and who had not believed him capable of anything save writing in his journal, turned to the quaint old fellow and said:

"Had n't you better write it down in your journal, or did you leave that valuable document in the wagon?"

The professor smiled and said:

"I never intrust so precious a document as my journal out of my sight."

"Don't you?"

"No, but we have not time now even to record the thoughts that breathe and words that burn within us. Let us after the wild fiery horses."

In a few moments we had shouldered our rifles and were hurrying away over the prairie.

"How far will it go before the steam gives out?" asked Brass.

"That is owing to circumstances."

"Well, about how far?"

"A hundred miles," I answered and we hurried on in our hopeless search after the lost steam team. Even the smoke had now disappeared.

CHAPTER XII.

PROF. DRYDUST AS A MARKSMAN.

"ALL hope is gone," sighed Buttons, who was in deep despair over the loss of the steam team.

"No, it's not," urged the professor.

"What hope have we?"

"Or stick in a badger hole."

"That's true."

"Now, Mr. Buttons, I have suggested some of the thousand ways, but my breath is entirely too precious for me to give all of them. You must yourself think of the others."

"Well, I haven't time."

"Neither have I."

"It was lucky we put the guns out on the grass," said Brass.

"Yes, we may be run down by the banditti at any moment," I answered.

We traveled on for some time, eating the cold provisions which we had spread out for a luncheon, and we walked.

Prof. Drydust's long legs stood him in good need, as with his old battered hat on his head he took the lead.

"Mr. Reade," he suddenly said.

"Well, professor?"

"I see the smoke again."

"So do I," said Brass.

"And I," put in Buttons.

"She has stopped," added Brass.

I now raised my field glass and took a long and careful survey of the prairie.

Yes, there, far in the distance, could be seen the smoke of the vanished steam team.

"What do you believe about it, Mr. Reade?" asked the professor.

"It is not going away from us," I answered.

"I fear it has upset, burst the boiler, or—"

"But, Mr. Reade," interrupted the professor, "if the boiler had burst, would there be any smoke?"

"There are two boilers," I answered. "One might explode and the other remain intact, in which case there might be smoke."

"Yes, so I see."

We traveled on for a few moments, when Brass said:

"It seems to me that that smoke is getting plainer."

"Seems to me that way," said Buttons.

"Yes, and nearer."

"Of course it's nearer, Brass, for we are going toward it."

"But we are not going rapid enough to make it get so much nearer—"

"By jove!" cried Buttons, "she's coming this way."

"Oh, impossible," said Brass. "Coming this way, nonsense."

"But see for yourself; that smoke and steam is a great deal nearer than it was."

"Of course."

"Hold!" cried the professor. "I have a theory."

"What is it?" Brass asked.

"By some means the machine, and a wonderful machine it is, has got turned around, and is coming back on the back track."

"But that machine, when not guided by some hand, will go right ahead in one straight direction," answered Brass.

"Sure enough, such is the tendency if it has no outward opposition. But who can say what obstructions the steam team has met with in its mad career. Something may have turned it completely about and is sending it this way, or rather it is sending itself this way."

"There is no doubt," I now said, "but that it is coming back this way, though what is the occasion of its coming, I can't pretend to say. It is possible that it might have got turned around."

On in its wild flight came the steam team. The smoke grew plainer, and at last a speck appeared on the plain.

It grew larger.

"That is what it is," said Brass. "It is the steam team, and no mistake."

"Let us board her," cried Buttons.

"Well, I doubt if the thing stops for us."

"Stop it."

"How?"

"Well—"

Buttons raised his hand and scratched his head. When a man gets puzzled for an answer, he usually resorts to scratching his head, as though scratching his head would help him to think.

"Yes," I put in at this moment. "I want to ask you, Buttons, how you are going to stop it?"

"As it is coming this way, gentlemen," said Professor Drydust, "and as it will certainly be here before long, I see no occasion why we should go to meet it. Let us save our strength."

"He is wise," I answered. "Let us all sit down and wait."

We sat down.

"We won't have to wait long, I am thinking," cried Brass.

"No, she's coming at a two-forty rate," put in Buttons.

"Mr. Reade," said Professor Drydust, taking his journal from his capacious coat pocket, "did you save your diary?"

"Yes."

"Haden't we better record the brilliant thoughts which flit through our minds?"

"I am thinking we had as well."

"All right."

I had my diary in my pocket, for a wonder, for I usually keep it in a sheet iron box which is water-tight, so that in case it should get lost, it will be as dry and in as good condition fifty years hence as when first completed.

"It is coming fast," I heard Brass say.

I looked up, and now saw the steam team coming directly toward us.

"Buttons, did you ever hear the story of the phantom ship?" Brass asked.

"No."

"That thing puts me in mind of it."

"What is a phantom ship?"

"A ghost ship."

"Nonsense. I don't believe it."

"Neither do I, but it's a nice little story, anyway."

"Well, tell it."

"Oh, you don't want to hear it."

"Yes, I do."

"Said you didn't believe in ghosts."

"Maybe I don't, but that don't prevent me from wanting to hear something about them."

"Do you want to hear real bad?"

"Yes."

"Well, let me see. I'll tell you."

"Go ahead."

"The phantom ship was a ship called the Flying Dutchman, and the captain, who was a man somewhat addicted to hot punch and swearing, got mad at the wind one day because it wouldn't blow to suit him and carry his vessel around Cape of Good Hope; and it is said he used some pretty strong language. He talked in such strong terms and used such adjectives that the atmosphere grew blue, and was a very strong odor of brimstone—"

"He was using brimstone talk, I guess."

"Well, the bards report that about the case."

"Go on. I don't want to interrupt you."

"Are you interested?"

"I am not quite asleep."

"Well the captain said he would go around the cape or weather the cape if he beat about those seas until the day of judgment."

"Did he do it?"

"No."

"What did he do?"

"Why, he had no sooner made that terrible oath than he saw in the skies great red letters which said, 'Doomed!' Then they all turned to ghosts."

"Who?"

"The captain and crew."

"Captain and crew."

"Yes, from that moment they were only shadows."

"And the ship?"

"It turned to a ghost too."

"Oh, nonsense."

"It's a fact."

"Why, before you commenced you said the story wasn't true."

"It's a fact, as a part of the story. According to the way the story is told, it turned to a shadow, and it's never seen except just before a storm. Then the wind whistles through its ghostly rigging, and whatever ship sees it sinks. It's always trying to round the cape but it never does."

"Why don't it?"

"It can't."

"Why can't it?"

"The punishment on captain and crew is that it must beat about those seas until the day of judgment."

"So she still beats?"

"Yes."

"Well, here comes our gallant bark."

The steam team was now so near we could hear the loud puffing and snorting of the horses of metal.

I rose to my feet and cried:

"Professor, put up your journal, here she comes."

The steam team thundered on like a pair of mad chargers.

"Woa, woa, woa!" yelled the professor waving his journal before them. "Head 'em off, stop 'em."

In his excitement the old fellow could hardly believe the metal horses were not alive and would not obey him to stop.

I laughed.

"You can't stop the machine!" I cried. "It's no use to try."

"Why, what ails the fools?"

"Steam is up."

He was directly before them, and for fear the steam team might run over him, I pulled him away, and the wonderful machine went thundering on.

Brass made a leap at the wagon as it passed, but failed to catch on.

The steam was going at a very rapid rate, but I was convinced from the manner in which it pulled along up the hill, that the steam was running low.

Brass, who had an excellent idea of machinery, was of the same opinion.

"The steam is getting low," he said, "though she runs at a pretty good rate yet."

"Yes."

"How long can she keep that up?"

"I can't say."

"Not many hours?"

"No, but they may run many miles yet."

"Oh, for another mud hole!" sighed Buttons.

But the steam team disappeared in the south, and we followed on after it.

I was more hopeful now, for if it merely run itself down without any accident, we could follow on its track and find it without any difficulty.

I took the lead and the others followed.

Going over the hill we saw before us three solitary trees standing on the plain. Those lone trees were like so many solitary sentinels.

Scarce had we discovered them ere we heard a yell on our left.

"Look!" cried Buttons.

"The James Boys!"

There were seven horsemen armed with rifles and revolvers, and all came galloping down toward us.

I saw at a glance that our only hope of escape lay in reaching cover of the lone trees.

"To the trees!" I shouted.

"Aye, aye!"

Away we flew.

Again did the professor's long legs stand him in good play.

He flew along at some distance ahead of me, and gaining the trees first sprang behind one of them.

Crack!

Crack!

A pair of rifles rang out in our rear.

Whiz!

Zip!

Bullets came frightfully close to my ears.

One struck the ground just at my side and sent the dust in my face.

"Shoot, Drydust. Why don't you shoot?" cried Brass.

"I am an accurate marksman," said Drydust, "and I never draw trigger until I am sure of my game."

"Well, here we are," said I as we all reached the lone trees and came to a halt.

Bang!

Whiz!

A bullet ripped off a piece of bark just above my head.

"Oh, how I wish I had my long-range rifle that we lost," I said.

"I do too," put in Brass.

Buttons was too badly blown to shoot accurately, but he was quick and nervous and would not wait.

He blazed away and missed.

"There, Buttons, you are a shot gone," said Brass.

"What's the odds?"

"Well, gentlemen, lead is plentiful, very plentiful," put in Professor Drydust, who was taking matters quite cool. "It is more plentiful than the reputation of a good marksman."

"So you are not going to play the part of a bad marksman, eh?" said Brass, who was examining his gun to assure himself it was all right.

"No. Now ye never saw me shoot, did you?"

"No."

"Well, when you do—"

"What then?"

"When you do, you'll hear something drop."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Brass laughed, and the old fellow compressed his lips and winked a humorous wink.

Brass blazed away and missed.

I fired and wounded a man, though the distance was too great yet to make shooting accurate.

"Now just watch some one do it scientifically," cried the professor.

He laid his gun against the side of a tree and took a deliberate aim.

For a few moments all was silence. Then his finger touched the trigger.

Crack!

Sharp and keen rang out the report. Then without shout or groan one of the horsemen fell limp and lifeless to the ground, and lay weltering his blood.

"That's the way to do; now the next thing is to record it in my journal. Now, boys, let me give you a bit of advice, and that is always record all important incidents in your journal."

"Yes, it's a good idea," I answered. "Then you have them for future reference."

"Hello, they are going off," cried Brass.

"Got enough of this?"

"So it seems."

They are picking up the fellow the professor hit and are carrying him away."

"By the way he lies across the horse I guess he is done for."

"So it seems."

"They are going."

"What does it mean?"

It means they have got enough of my skill. They don't care to risk another shot from Prof. Drydust the marksman, and with a quiet chuckle the old man reloaded his rifle.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNHINGED.

"WELL, that little event is over," said Brass; "suppose we be moving."
 "No, it's not over," cried the professor.
 "Not over."
 "No."
 "Why not? They are in full flight."
 "Yes, but it is not over until the principal events have been recorded in my—"
 "Go ahead."

Brass threw himself on the ground at the foot of the tree very much like a man who is resigned to his fate.

The professor then began to carefully write down the chief incidents in the conflict.

When he had finished and I had also recorded them in my diary, I called all to come on.

"We'll be going now," I said.

"All right."

All day we traveled in the track of the steam team, and when night came had seen nothing of it. But we camped for the night, and after partaking of some cold provisions which we had had the foresight to put in our pockets, placed a guard, and the others went to sleep on the ground.

Buttons was the first guard.

We had scarce got to sleep, when he came to me and whispered:

"Wake up."

I am not a heavy sleeper, and in a moment my eyes were open.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Is there danger?"

"I don't know."

"What did you wake me for?"

"I think it would be better for us if we were all awake."

"Well—wake the others—but no, hold—"

"Well?"

"Have you seen anything?"

"Yes."

"A ghost?"

"I don't know."

"What was it like?"

"There was something moving through the grass, and it had eyes like fire."

Buttons had never been on the prairie before, for I had engaged him a raw New Yorker unaccustomed to prairie life.

"Well, Buttons, don't be alarmed."

"I want to shoot it."

"You may."

"Thought I'd better wake you first."

"That's all right."

"Haden't I better wake the others?"

"Your gun will wake them. Where was it?"

He pointed off to the south where the ground was a little higher.

"Is your gun loaded?"

"Gun loaded! What a question, as if I did not always keep my gun loaded."

"Well, I didn't know."

"Well, I do."

Then he took two or three steps and sat down on the ground, his gun across his knees.

I threw on a few more buffalo chips to make the fire brighter, for I had an idea what it was that had alarmed him. It blazed up and from the hill above I saw a something creeping, cautiously creeping along the ground.

It didn't make any noise and seemed like a shadow.

From the position I had I saw a pair of bright and shining orbs. They gleamed like living coals of fire and I knew what it was.

Slowly and cautiously it advanced.

Sometimes it dipped down below the grass so that it could not be seen at all.

At last I saw Buttons raise his rifle to his shoulder.

His eye glanced along the barrel a moment, and then—

Crack!

A flash of fire, ringing echoes, and something very like a whine was heard, then a spasmodic knocking in the grass.

"What—what—what's the matter?" roared Brass.

"What's up?" shouted the professor.

"Nothing is up. Something went down!" cried Buttons.

"What?"

"I don't know."

"What's that shot?"

"I don't know."

"At what?"

"I don't know."

"And hit it, too!" I cried.

Then I explained:

"It was a coyote—a prairie wolf—sneaking up here to steal some food."

This proved to be correct, for we found the wolf with a bullet through his brain.

"That's a wretched poor excuse for waking a fellow!" growled Brass.

"I had no wish to wake you," Buttons responded. "All I wanted was to shoot the wolf."

"Couldn't you do it without making so much noise?"

"Blame the gun, not me."

"Well, you've killed your coyote; now let us have no more disturbance."

"Go to sleep, all of you," said I. "I will remain on guard for two or three hours."

The night passed without any other adventure worthy of note.

Next morning, at early dawn, we were again on our journey after the steam team.

The trail was easily followed, for the grass and weeds were broken down, and the road cut up in a dozen places. I was now pretty confident that we should come on to the machine before nightfall.

We came to some houses where a small settlement had pushed its way out on the frontier, and found a plowed field across which the team had sped, tearing its way through a wire fence.

I saw a man gazing ruefully at the trail made by the passage of my great invention.

He was an ignorant frontier farmer, and when I asked:

"Did you see a steam team pass this way?" actually did not know to what I alluded.

"I saw suthin' strange," he growled, "but I guess it war old nick."

"What was it like?"

"A pair o' the biggest hosses, with silver on 'em, I ever seed. They snorted fire, an' jist look wot they done."

And he pointed to his shattered fence and newly hoed corn trampled down by the steam team.

"When did you see them?"

The old fellow looked up at the sun, and turned his eyes first in one direction and then the other. At last he said:

"Wall, guess it war wall on inter the shank o' the evenin', mister. Wife an' I hed jist sot down to eat our supper w'en I heard a kind uv a screechin' an' jinglin' uv chains. Then I looked at wife, an' wife she jist looked at me. She turns kinder white, an' so did I. Wall, I got up an' went ter the winder an' looked out."

"Great Scott!" sez I.

"Wot's ther matter?" sez she.

"It air Old Nick?"

"Where?"

"Comin' right across the prairie."

"Lem me see."

"Come ter the door."

"Well, we both ran ter the door an' looked out."

"Blast ef thar didn't come them air fire snortin' hosses and jist plunge whack through the fence as though them air wires wot u'd turn a Texas steer war rotten twine. An' they went across my corn a-singin' the dirt on young corn right an' left. They smashed out on t'other side an' went snortin' on. Thar war some dry grass on t'other side an' it sot it all on fire, and sich a burnin' and sich a time yer never seed."

"Well, stranger, the thing, wotever it war, war gone," and he pointed on the trail, which was now plain enough to be seen.

We had got about all the information from him we could and pressed on.

Next we met a boy.

"Did you see hosses of fire," I asked, "pulling a wagon?"

"Wall, I did."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Did they scare you?"

"Skeer me. Wall now, mister, I'll say this ere much ter you. I'm not usually very easy skeered, yer know. I've f'it Injuns and all them things. Shot a painter once down on Painter Crick, and f'it more rattle snakes 'n ye could shake a stick at in er week, but I'm blamed if that air thing didn't jist take the starch out o' me."

"What did you do?" asked Brass.

"Dol goodness! why I jist ran and ran."

"Home?"

"Home, no; I didn't know whar I war goin' till I found myself away out on Injun Crick."

"You didn't?"

"Nary bit."

"Have you been home since?"

"No."

"Where are you going now?"

"Wall, I thort I'd jist sneak back hum, yer know, an' see if the blamed thing war gone."

We went on, and the boy, I suppose, went home.

From all we could learn, in answer to our inquiries, the Steam Team ran down into some low lands, and we would probably find it fast in the mud, or, what I most feared, in some creek.

Fortunately for the safety of my wonderful invention there were few creeks in this part of the country, and it was possible that it might run until the steam was exhausted before it would run into one.

It was nearly dusk when we came upon a party of farmers who were armed with rifles and pistols.

"Hold on thar, stranger," said one of them.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am the constable in this 'ere deestrect."

"Oh, are you?"

"Guess I am. I war elected the constable."

"What do you want with us, Mr. Constable?"

"Guess we're goin' to hev a scrimmage."

"A fight?"

"That's it."

"With whom?"

"Dnn know 'em, stranger, but they air hoss-thieves."

I turned to Brass and whispered:

"Maybe it's the James Boys."

"I'll bet it is."

"I suppose they want us to help them."

"Yes."

Then I turned to the constable and said:

"Well, my friend, what do you want with us?"

"I want you ter help us."

"Capture the horse-thieves?"

"Captur' or kill 'em, it's erbout all ther same thing ter us. Ye look like fellers wot ain't afeered o' powder."

"We have all been in conflicts, and are not afraid of powder," I answered. "Where are your horse-thieves?"

"Down in the old stunn' house."

"Where?"

"Down under the hill."

"How far away?"

"'Bout a mile."

And he pointed off to our left. I discovered by the course indicated by his finger that the house would not take us a great distance out of our way.

"Boys, we'll go," I said.

"All right," all assented.

"Now how do you know they are in that old stone house?"

"Oh, bekase we've got 'em hemmed up thar."

"Have you?"

"Yes."

"How long since?"

"Sace mornin'."

"And have you a guard around the house?"

"Yes."

"You are quite sure?"

"I know it."

"And they have not got out?"

"No, an' we can't git in. Ef it warn't fur ther big door, yer know, we mought git in, but we can't unhinge that."

"We'll agree to unhinge it for you."

"Good. Come on."

Then we hurried down to the hill.

"Now look out, you fellers wot don't know anything erbout it. D'yer see that ar place whar ther road turns down the hill an' yer kin see some white clay and dust?"

"Yes, we see it."

"Wall, sir, right thar's whar ye'll hev trouble."

"How?"

"They've got their guns sighted on it, an' when yer git thar they'll begu ter pour in hot shot."

"How'll we do to avoid their rakin' fire?"

"Rakin' fire—yas, that's what I call it. Why, run. 'Tain't twenty jumps, yer know, untill yer out o' sight o' them in the bushes, an' ef a feller's quick ernuff he'll git out o' danger afore he kin be hit."

"Bear that in mind," said I to the men.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Reade, I deem it necessary to record this in my journal."

"Oh, wait until we get over," said Brass.

"Well now, Mr. Brass, that might all do very well if I ever got over, but perhaps I might never pass yon historic spot."

Then with his pencil he wrote, speaking aloud as he did so:

"Very remarkable adventure—we are going to unhinge a door. We are going just now to jump over a spot where bullets are to rain."

"If we jump right lively it is reported that we may get over safely, but the chances of being killed just now are quite good. I don't know

that I can write any more in this journal until I get over that bald spot of ground, and then I may not feel like it."

"Well, have you done?" I asked.

"I've finished," he said.

"Who will be first to make the jump?"

"I will," said Brass.

"Go in a hurry when you start."

"I will—good-bye!"

He turned about and shook hands with all of us, and then holding his rifle in his hand ran at full speed up the barren spot and made a tremendous leap. He touched the ground only to make another spring and was quickly over.

Crack!

Crack!

Two shots cut up the dust behind him.

It would be more dangerous for the next and the next.

So I called on a volunteer.

Prof. Drydust, with his face as solemn as ever, said he would try it.

Holding his rifle, he ran up the barren spot and leaped half way across at one bound.

Half a dozen shots rang out as he fled, and one of them chipped a corner off his beloved journal, which so enraged the professor that he vowed he would be revenged.

I went next and a bullet cut a small place on the stock of my rifle.

It was not long before we all got over, and beyond a small scratch on one of the farmer's shoulders no man was hurt.

"How many are in the house?" I asked.

There was a difference of opinion on that.

"I doubt thar air but five," the constable answered, "though some on 'em say thar air ten."

"Ten?"

"Yes."

"Well, how many men have you here?"

"Sixteen now'n all, besides you 'uns."

We four would make twenty.

I then informed the farmer that we had traveled all day without food, and he sent a boy off to the house for some food for us.

We sat down among some bushes and waited for the boy to bring us our food. It came at last, and we made a hearty meal.

By this time the sun had set, and it was growing quite dark.

"Now, boys, the first thing to do is to unhinge the door."

"Can it be done?" asked Brass.

"I think so."

"How?"

"Well, I am not prepared just yet to state how, but I am going to reconnoiter just as soon as it is a little darker."

"Don't do it, Frank," said Brass.

"Why?"

"It's too dangerous."

"Ha, ha, old boy, nothing is too dangerous when it comes to capturing the James Boys."

"Oh, yes, if you want to die, you know, you couldn't die in a better cause," said the professor. "Now," he added, a moment later, "that is a brilliant thought, and I will just record it in my journal."

And then he wrote it down.

As soon as it was quite dark I began crawling up to the door.

The house was up on the hillside, and the hillside was covered with bushes and trees and stones. Slowly and cautiously I wound my way serpent-like about among the bushes and stones and trees until I was at the front great porch and halted.

I could now hear the men inside talking.

I crawled up to the great door and began feeling in my pocket for a steel bit and small brace. Being an inventor and machinist as well, I have formed the habit of carrying some small tools in my pocket.

These tools which I carried were exceedingly hard and sharp.

I drove a small chisel in the door facing.

Then I took the gimlet and bored under the hinge. All this made some noise, it is true, but inside they never heard it, for they were talking and making no little noise.

As silently as was possible I scooped out some wood above and below the hinge.

Then I slipped the chisel under it and pushed up the wire which fastened the two hinges together until I had actually drawn it out.

The top hinge I served the same way.

It was risky business, it was true, for I had to stand almost against the door. Had they suspected I was outside there, they would have poured a volley on me.

But the dangerous and by all odds the most difficult task I had ever attempted, was accomplished. The door was unhinged, but stood yet in its place.

How was I to get it down?

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STEAM TEAM FOUND.

A LUCKY thought at last came to me. I had, among other things in my pocket, a screw with a ring on the end, and I bored the screw into the door. Then I fastened a strong bit of twine-cord to the ring and crawled away with the string, unwinding as I went.

Slowly and cautiously down the slope, and every moment exposed to a shot from within.

A voice speaking within the house now attracted my attention, and I came to a halt and listened.

"It won't be long," said one.

"Are they coming?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"It's time."

"Time for them to come?"

"Yes."

"You can't set a time for Jesse James to come."

"Well, we can cut our way out just whenever we want to."

"They have reinforcements."

"I know it."

"I wonder who they are?"

"I don't know."

"It can't be that terrible Frank Reade?"

"Frank Reade! No; he travels around in a steam wagon."

"But did you hear about his steam team?"

"No—what of it?"

"It was seen running away."

"When?"

"Didn't Dick Little tell you of it?"

"No. Is Dick here?"

"Yes, down in the cellar making hand grenades."

"What did Dick say?"

"Dick said he saw a great smoke coming over the prairie yesterday, and soon saw it was the steam team. Then he rode his horse into a thicket to hide, for Frank Reade and his two detectives are dead shots."

"Yes, and that old long haired professor sends a bullet entirely too straight to be comfortable."

"He can."

"But go on, and tell us all about what he saw."

"Well, you see, the thicket in which Dick was hiding was a sort of upland, you know, and he could see down into the wagon as it passed under him."

"And did he?"

"Yes."

"What did he see?"

"There wasn't a soul in or about the steam team. It was just running away of its own accord."

Then I heard a prolonged whistle, and some one asked:

"What had become of all of them?"

"That no one knows," was the answer. "They had all gone. Dick is certain they were not in the steam wagon nor about it."

I waited to hear no more, but crept on down the hill, playing out the cord until I reached my companions under the hill.

"Frank, Frank, is it you?" asked Brass.

"Yes."

"All right?"

"I am all right," I answered.

"What have you done?"

"Unhinged the door," I answered. "Now get all the men ready for a charge, and I will pull it down, and we will go in on them at a charge."

"All right; we will have them ready in a few moments."

While Brass and Buttons, assisted by the constable, were getting the storming party ready for a charge, I heard in the distance the thunder of horses' feet.

"What does that mean?" I asked of Professor Drydust, who was at my side.

"It means horsemen are coming."

"Yes, and a few of them at that," I answered.

Then I remembered the conversation I had overheard in the house, and I knew now what it meant.

"It is the James Boys coming with reinforcements, professor," I said.

"Maybe."

Then there was no time for delay.

"Harry up! everybody be ready to storm before reinforcements come!" I shouted. "Now, ready! One—two—three!"

I gave the cord a pull; with a crash the door fell. There was a volley, a rush, another volley, fire and smoke, groans and falling bodies.

Men scattered in every direction, seeking shelter from the rain of death about them. I tried to rally them and partly succeeded, when suddenly there burst on us, like a mighty avalanche, a body of horsemen.

Shooting right and left and yelling like demons.

Men were knocked down and trampled on by the horses. I saw in a moment that all was lost, and seizing Brass by the hand I ran with him back down the hill.

When I reached the foot of the hill I looked back. Some one was coming.

"Who comes there?" I cried.

"Me."

The voice was familiar, and I had no trouble in recognizing the tall, lank form of the professor, who was dragging after him a no less personage than Buttons.

"Is Buttons hurt?" I asked.

"No," he answered.

"Is Brass hurt?" asked Buttons.

"No," Brass answered.

"Well, boys, the jig is up, so far as storming that stone house is concerned," I said.

"Yes, and the jig is almost up with us," cried Buttons.

"I would suggest, Mr. Reade," said the professor, "that we are not as safe here as sheep in the fold."

"No, and we will get out of here just as soon as we can," I answered.

"The sooner the better," returned Brass.

"I would like to kill a dozen or two of those fellows before I go," said Buttons.

"Yes, but they might object," returned Brass.

"Very well put in," returned the professor.

"Suppose we put out," added Buttons.

We ran down the creek bank for a few rods and were about to cross on the other side, when on looking up I discovered a sentry sitting there on his horse with a Winchester rifle.

"It won't do," I whispered.

Then we ran through the thicket trying to make our way back up to the house.

We gained a grassy mound about a fourth of a mile from the stone house and here paused to look back. Ah, what a scene of desolation and destruction was behind us.

The constant cracking of fire-arms was accompanied by the yells of victims.

"Oh, how they are shooting down the poor wretches," sighed Brass.

"So they are," answered Buttons.

"It would have been our fate but for the wonderful forethought and sagacity of Mr. Reade," put in Professor Drydust. "Really I must devote a whole page of my journal to him."

"We are not out of the woods yet," I returned. "Let us go to the house back on the road."

"The little farm-house we passed," asked Brass.

"Yes, it can't be far from here."

"No, it's not. The house is just over the hill."

We again started running over the hill, and had gained the crest, when Buttons cried:

"Stop!"

"What's the matter, Buttons?"

"Look there."

We all paused and gazed in the direction indicated by the finger of Buttons. It certainly was a sight well calculated to curdle the blood of the beholder. The bright flames were leaping up the sides of the house, and licking the roof.

"They are ahead of us, boys," I said.

"Yes."

"What'll we do?"

"There's but one way left."

"What is that?"

"Let us get down to the wheat field and crawl through it."

"All right, Frank, lead the way," answered Brass.

"We must all keep together."

"We know that."

"Come on, then."

Down the hill we descended, and hurried into the wheat field.

Then we began crawling through it.

The wheat was tall, and concealed us.

At last we were on the other side.

"Here is a hill," said Brass.

"So much the better," I answered.

"Why?"

"On the other side we will be out of sight of them."

"That's so."

"Then let's get on the other side of it just as quickly as possible."

We were not long in getting over the hill into the ravine below, and were quite sure we had not been discovered by any of the James Boys.

"Oh, if we only had the steam team," sighed Brass, "we could then defy them."

"Yes, but we haven't got it," I answered.

"And they haven't got it," put in the professor. "That's a mite of consolation to our poor aching hearts."

"They wouldn't have sense enough to run it, even if they had it," said Brass.

"I don't know. Jesse James was making a good stagger at it," returned Buttons.

"He ran it in the mud."

"That was because he did not know how to turn on the electric light, and was not able to see his way without it," I returned.

"Suppose he would learn the next time."

"Yes, he would. We all profit by our mistakes," I answered.

"Now that's a good word—an excellent word. I will just write that down in my journal—"

"Not now," returned Brass.

"Well, then, just as soon as an occasion presents itself I will."

We had not gone far before I discovered a dark object sweeping over the prairie. My eyes are very keen, and I can see an object a long distance away, even in the night.

"I see something," I said.

"What is it?" asked the professor.

"Yes, your eyes are keen as a hawk's. Look again, Frank, and tell us what it is that you see."

I had my field glass, but unfortunately it was not a night glass, and did me but very little good.

"I can't make it out just now," I answered, "but we will soon know."

"Why?"

"It is coming this way, and coming very rapidly."

"Can't you guess what it is?"

"I would hardly dare venture a guess," I answered, "but if I was to do so, I would say that it was a man on horseback."

"A man on horseback?"

"Yes."

"Then, boys, let's lay for him."

"Hold on, Brass."

"Why hold on, are there more?"

"No, but—"

"Then what harm can it be in shooting down one of the James Boys' bandit?"

"None, if it was one."

"Isn't it one?"

"We don't exactly know yet," I answered.

"We'll find out soon, for I am itching to leave one of them on the grass."

"It will be too dark to tell, so let us lay low and capture him."

This plan was agreed upon by all, and we consequently lay down in the grass until the horseman came up.

He was riding from an opposite direction from the stone house, but I believed, nevertheless, that he was one of the James Boys' gang.

He came up until he was almost on us, and then I sprang up from the grass and caught his bridle rein.

In a moment the others were all around him and had dragged him from the saddle.

But he proved to be only a belated farmer, and he was frightened almost out of his wits by our sudden assault.

From him we learned that a wonderful team of horses had run into a wood not over twenty miles away, and that they had not been seen to come out.

He said the horses snorted fire and drew a wide, heavy wagon after them.

"Do you think the team is in that wood yet?" I asked.

"I believe so."

"It's ours," said Brass.

"Yes."

"Yer team?" cried the amazed farmer. "Do yer hosses snort fire like that?"

"Yes."

"Great gosh! Please lem me go hum, won't yer?"

We let him go and set out to find the steam team.

Next morning at sunrise we came upon the forest and then we pursued our way into it, following the track until we came upon the steam team.

CHAPTER XV.

UP AND AWAY.

The steam team was about half way in the forest.

It had by some marvelous coincidence or circumstance ran against no tree or stone that would hurt it, and was whole.

Not a thing was broken. Not a cog had

"Well, this is luck!" cried Brass. "How did it stop?"

"It just run down—that was all," I answered.

"Steam gave out."

"Nothing broke?" asked Buttons.

"Not a thing."

"How lucky."

"Well, yes."

"A most remarkable incident. I shall have to make a note of that in—"

"Hurry out—now gather up some dry wood and let's have a fire," I interrupted.

"All right—all right," cried Brass.

"There is no time for anything until we get fire up."

Prof. Drydust saw the point, and putting up his journal with a sigh, busied himself with the others in gathering up dry sticks to start the fires. I examined the furnaces.

Our coal supply was good yet, but the water was about all exhausted, and while Brass gathered some kindling wood, I set Drydust and Buttons to carrying water from a spring to fill the boilers and water tank.

Fortunately the spring was not a great distance away.

I was busy arranging everything, rubbing and polishing the machinery so that there might not be a particle of rust or dirt on any of it. More machinery rusts out than ever wears out.

In fact, if engines were only taken care of, and run as they should be, a good one would last ten generations. This has always been my theory.

Buttons and Drydust were gone for water, Brass was in the wood picking up dry sticks here and there and I was alone at the machine, when I heard a footstep near.

Supposing that it was either Brass or Buttons, I went on with my rubbing and polishing without looking up.

"Hello!" said a strange voice at my side.

I started up, and was amazed to find a stranger standing within four paces of me.

"How are you?" he said, with a smile.

The stranger was a man about forty-five, with a pleasant face and dark beard.

He looked more like a business man than a farmer, though he wore the broad-brimmed hat and heavy boots of the cow-boy.

In his hand he carried the short quirt used by cattlemen.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am Bill Parker. Have you never heard of me?"

"No."

"Well, I am."

"Do you live about here?"

"My cattle ranch is not over ten miles away."

"Where are you going?"

I did not know what else to say, and in fact I did not at all like the appearance of the stranger, though I could not say that there was anything about him to warrant my suspicions.

"I was just out hunting some strays from my herd."

"Yes, sir."

"A fine machine there."

"It is."

"Yours?"

"Yes."

"You must be Mr. Frank Reade?"

"I am."

"I am glad to meet a man who has made such a wonderful reputation as an inventor. Why, sir, your name is known far and near. Wherever I go I hear Frank Reade, the inventor, spoken of, and if I pick up a newspaper I read in it only accounts of Frank Reade."

I blushed modestly, and bowed under the compliment which he had paid me.

"And so this is the wonderful steam team?"

"Yes."

"I heard you were in the West."

"I have been here some time, sir."

"Ah, may I ask on what mission you are on now?"

"That is a secret, sir."

"Oh, is it? May I look at the team?"

"Certainly."

"Thank you."

I did not like the appearance of the fellow one bit, and I dared not say so. I followed him around, as he looked at the team, explained every part of it to him, and took care that he touched no part of it.

"Confound those fellows, why don't they come on?" I mentally asked myself, as I kept one eye on my invention and one on the man who had paid me this unexpected visit.

"Where have I seen him before?" I thought. His features or his voice were not altogether new to me. I had heard him speak at some other time, or I had seen his face.

This was strange, exceedingly strange, yet I

could not call to mind where I had seen or heard him.

"I say, Mr. Reade, I've heard it hinted what your business in Missouri and Kansas was."

"Have you?"

"Yes."

"What are those hints?"

"People hint that you have come to Missouri for the purpose of hunting down the James Boys."

"Is that the rumor?"

"Yes."

"You will be kind enough to inform the people that they do not know what they are talking about."

"Do you say that is not your mission?"

"I do not say anything about it."

"Silence is an affirmative."

"Not always."

I never felt an eye pierce me so like a knife as did his. I met his gaze, but it tried my nerves and self-possession about as completely as they were ever tried before.

"You don't say so," he said somewhat impudently.

"I do, and furthermore, Mr. Bill Parker, if such is your name, the matter is none of your business."

His face flashed a moment, and he answered: "I don't know now, I don't know. I will see about that."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"Now, as you have made so free as to question into and even doubt my motives, I want to tell you something."

"What?"

"I doubt your name being Bill Parker, and you are no cattle king."

His face paled and flushed alternately, and his breath came hard and quick. After a moment of silence, he said:

"If I am not Bill Parker, who am I?"

"Jesse James himself, for all I now."

"What! you know me?"

I started back, now dumfounded with amazement, for now I knew him.

"You are Jesse James."

His hand went toward his belt, and he snatched a pistol. My last moment had well nigh come, I knew, but with a mad desperation I hurled the wrench I carried in my hand at him and knocked the pistol out of his hand.

With a wild yell he sprang at me.

I struck him with my fist.

Though he partially parried the blow with his left arm, it somewhat stunned him. He gave me an ugly rap as he staggered and then we clenched.

"Frank Reade!" he hissed, through his teeth, as we struggled up and down for the mastery, "I will kill you!"

"I have no doubt you would, you miserable wretch, if you could, but I intend choking you to death."

He made several frantic efforts to get a weapon, but as rapidly as he drew one I managed to kick it out of his hand.

We dealt each other furious blows, that were raising great welts on our heads, but as yet neither had got in a good square knock down.

For several moments we had fought and clung to each other with wonderful tenacity, and had tumbled and scuffled all over the ground. At last, from sheer exhaustion, we paused, and clinging to each other so that neither could get an advantage over the other, we gazed in each other's eyes.

"Frank Reade, I am going to kill you!" he hissed, hoarse with rage and exhaustion.

"If you can."

"I can."

"Why don't they come?" I mentally asked myself a hundred times in that brief struggle. Surely Brass, or Buttons, or Drydust should come to my relief.

Any of them were within call and all I would have to do would be to raise my voice and call them. But I was out of breath, and besides my whole attention was given to Jesse James.

If I made any call, or my whole mind and energy were for a moment diverted from him, I felt sure that he would in some way get the advantage of me.

So all through the conflict, which had been most terrible, I had been as silent as the tomb.

"Jesse James, you will have to surrender to me."

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed the burly ruffian. "You are not enough for a breakfast scuffle for me."

"I know I am not as large as you are."

"No, nor as strong."

"Perhaps not, but you know the battle is not always for the strong nor the race for the swift."

"I'll be strong and swift enough for you. I will teach you not to come meddling with my affairs, you infernal interloper."

"You thief."

"Thief I am, but not a meddler."

"I meddle only when in the protection of society."

It was my design to delay the struggle as long as possible, for if I could only hold out a few moments longer, I was quite sure that some one of my three companions would come to my aid.

"What's society to you away back there in New York?" growled Jesse James. "What do you care for us here?"

"Everything."

"It's a lie. The railroads and express companies care, and you come because they hire you to come. That's all there is to it."

I made no answer, and Jesse, after waiting for a few moments, added:

"Yes, it's blood money that brings you here. It's blood money—you are hired to kill me just as men are hired to shoot wolves," and his face grew blacker and he gnashed his teeth more fiercely as he glared at me.

"Jesse James, you are not a suitable judge of such matters."

"I am not?"

"No."

"I have been hounded and hunted year after year for the last fifteen years. Every man's hand is against me. Everybody hates me and I hate everybody for hating me."

"Who began this?"

"Who began it?" he cried, hoarse with rage.

"Yes, who began it but you? Had you never offended any law, no law's minions would ever have been on your trail."

"Well, there is no need to delay this longer," he cried. "Your companions will be returning soon and then I will be at a disadvantage. There will be two to one; let us get to it at once. Let us fight to the death, for I tell you that I am going to kill you. Yes, kill you sure, ha, ha, ha!"

With demoniacal fury he hurled himself on me. He had a decided advantage in weight and strength, but I was most agile of the two, though Jesse James was as active as an acrobat.

I managed to keep him at bay for a few moments, and but for an unforeseen event I would have conquered him.

But at the most interesting moment of the proceedings I accidentally stepped on the wrench which lay on the ground at my feet, and my foot slipped.

I had been clutching at his throat, and it was telling on his strength.

Jesse's face grew black and his knees were tottering. Only a few seconds longer and I would have triumphed over him, but at this unlucky moment, just on the verge of victory, so slight an incident as the slipping of my foot a single inch caused me to lose my hold on his throat, and in a second he had recovered.

Whack!

A blow staggered me.

He had turned the tables now, and had me by the throat, and oh, how wildly, how furiously I struggled to regain the advantage I had over him, but in vain.

"I'll kill you now—I'll kill you!" hissed Jesse James.

Everything swam about me, and my eyes grew dim, and I knew that consciousness was slipping away. At this moment I heard the voices of some of my companions talking as they returned. They were too far away for me to catch a word they said, and they were walking very slowly, or seemed to be walking slowly, and talking in an unconcerned way, which led me to believe they either did not know or care anything of what became of me. They had no idea that I was at that moment engaged in a terrible life and death struggle with the bandit.

I could hear Jesse chuckling when he found me sinking.

I clung to both his arms to prevent his using a pistol, but my strength was going so fast that I too knew it would soon be over.

My senses were slipping away.

They were coming, but would not be in time to save me.

Then suddenly I heard something which sounded very much like the explosion of a bomb, and I felt a sense of great relief.

"Frank, Frank," said Buttons, holding me up.

"Are you dead?"

I opened my eyes and found Buttons bending over me, while Professor Drydust was chasing

"Frank, it was a close rub."

"Yes, very."

"But you are all right?"

"Yes. Buttons?"

"What?"

"Where is Brass?"

"Hasn't come with the wood yet."

"Well, you are the slowest fellows I ever saw."

"No, we are not."

"I have had what to me seemed a seven years' fight with Jesse James."

"Jesse James?"

"Yes, Jesse James."

"That man wasn't Jesse James."

"He was."

"Great guns. I would have shot him dead in his tracks if I had known that."

"Did you have a chance?"

"Could have done it easily, old boy. I came right up behind him while you and he were fighting, and I struck him a whack that broke the charm, and sent him flying away through the woods. Had I known it was Jesse James I would have pulled out my revolver and shot him dead in his tracks."

"Buttons?"

"Yes."

"You have lost the golden opportunity of your life."

"I guess I have."

Brass came up a few moments later with the wood.

He was amazed to learn that Jesse James had been here during his absence.

"Well, if that fellow is lurking around here we can't get away any too soon," he said.

"Fire up, Brass. Put in the water, Buttons. Where is Drydust?"

"Here I am."

"Did you catch up with him?"

"No, verily, he runs as if he was all springs."

In a few moments we had the steam up.

By this time I was fully recovered, and cried:

"All get in."

"Aye aye," and the three faithful fellows climbed into the wagon, and I took my place on the seat.

"Now, away!"

"Up and away," cried Brass, as the Steam Team began moving through the wood.

CHAPTER XVI.

STORMING THE STONE HOUSE.

"Is it all right?" asked Brass.

"Yes."

"Nothing broken?"

"No."

"Nothing lost?"

"Not a thing, as I have yet discovered."

"Try the headlights and see if they are all O. K. We don't want to run into another such a scrape as we did that night."

"We didn't run into it, Brass," put in Buttons, "we only got on the edge of it."

"Hello!"

"What's the matter, Brass?" I asked.

"Buttons is recovering his wit. The sign is a good one."

"Rather."

"There is a better sign," said Buttons.

"What?"

"Recovering the Steam Team."

"Yes, we will all agree with you in that."

"Well, Frank, where are you going now?" asked Brass, as we ran out of the wood and emerged on the prairie.

"I don't know exactly," I answered. "I want to find Jesse James now."

"You found him a bit ago."

"Yes—but under unfavorable circumstances."

"Frank, you have a black eye."

I had been conscious all the while of one of my eyes growing larger.

Jesse had struck me several blows on the face, and they were nearly all telling, as well as swelling, blows. My chief satisfaction was that I had given him a few.

I stopped the steam team and turning about raised the lid of a small box which I used as a medicine chest.

"What are you going to do?" asked Brass.

"I need some repairs," I answered. "I am going to be my own surgeon."

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Reade, I have just finished recording the principal events in my journal, and I wish to be your surgeon. I—I am skilled in the craft."

"I don't need a surgeon very bad. They are only scratches," I answered.

But he would insist on bandaging up my wounds, and I found him quite handy with the scissors and sticking plaster. He succeeded very well, and proved to be quite an efficient surgeon.

When he had got my wounds all bound up he said:

"Now, sir, I'll warrant that you will be able for duty. Let me advise you, however, before we proceed to any new adventures to have in your diary everything recorded that has transpired, for there have been some very remarkable adventures this day."

"We had better discuss what we are to do," said I.

"Well, we will. Now, gentlemen, the meeting is called to order, and we are open for business. What is the pleasure of this meeting?" said Professor Drydust.

"To capture or kill the James Boys," answered Brass.

"Do you put that as a motion?"

"Yes."

"A second to it."

"We all second it and it's carried without a vote," interrupted Buttons.

I laughed at the coolness and drollness of my companions, and said:

"It's all well enough, my friends, to make motions and pass resolutions about the James Boys, but they don't care a fig for all the resolutions we may pass."

"No."

"What will we do? What plan will we adopt to capture them?" I asked.

"Let's see. Better find them the first thing," put in Buttons.

"The humor of that fellow is just getting to be excruciating," put in Brass.

For a few moments a silence reigned over the group.

At last it was broken by myself.

"Boys," I said, "I believe we had as well go back to the stone house."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but I have an impression that the James Boys are lingering about it yet."

"Well, we were there," growled Prof. Drydust, "and we couldn't effect anything."

"We didn't have that," said I.

"What?"

I pointed to the cannon.

"Oh, yes. I see now."

"That's the very thing," said Brass. "We can blow the old stone house down."

"We'll batter down the walls," put in Buttons.

"I wish we were there now."

"I don't care to be there unless the James Boys are there. Then we can just play about on the prairie and send balls into the old house at long range. They may charge on us. If they do we can retreat."

"Yes, faster than their horses can come."

"Let's go at once."

"Well, Mr. Reade, what assurance have we that we will find the James Boys there when we get there?" asked Professor Drydust.

"None."

"Then why go?"

"What assurance have we of finding them anywhere we may go?" I asked.

"None."

"Well, then, we might as well go there as anywhere."

"That's so."

"Then let's go."

"Hold on a moment, let us consider."

"What?"

"How did Jesse James come here, and what was his object in doing so?"

"Well, that's worthy of considering."

"Did you see his horse?" asked Buttons.

"I did not," I answered.

"I did."

"Did you, professor?"

"I did."

"Where—when?"

"Well, you know where we came upon you fighting for life?"

"Yes—well, no, I don't know much about it; fact is, I have a faint recollection of almost going under about that time."

"Well, I guess you did," said Drydust. "You had a decidedly gone under look."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"Well, go ahead."

"Well, Mr. Buttons here struck one terrible blow, a part of which landed on Jesse's head and sent him spinning away twenty steps and made him drop his knife, which he was going to stick in you. Then he ran—"

"Oh, yes, we know all about that. Come down to the horse," said I, impatiently.

"There wasn't any need of going back to the birth of Adam, anyway," growled Brass.

"Well, I don't care, but— But hold

thoughts which go, like so many race horses, coursing through my brain. Aye, Mr. Brass, if I could only convert you into keeping a journal, I would be delighted."

"Well, it wouldn't delight me at all."

"Why?"

"I don't want nothing to do with keeping journals. We'll have enough to-day to do to keep out of the way of the James Boys."

"Brass."

"Well, sir?"

"You might try another shot."

"At the house?"

"No, the men. You have punished the old house enough for a while."

"All right."

"Is the cannon loaded?"

"It is."

"Train it, and as soon as you fire, we'll start up."

He trained the gun a moment and cried:

"Fire!"

Buttons pulled the cord.

"Boom!"

The smoke for a second hid them from view, but when it cleared away we saw a man and horse struggling down on the ground.

I now started the team.

Jesse saw that their only show was to press right on at once, and I heard him shout:

"Charge!"

"Here they come," cried Brass.

"Get your guns."

"We are running slow yet."

"We'll go faster soon."

The steam team was not going faster than a swift trot, and the banditti were coming at full speed.

I knew that in a moment I could outstrip them, for what could horses of flesh and blood do against horses of iron and steel?

"Get your guns," I cried.

"We have got them."

"Be ready to give them a broadside when I give the word."

"What? You ain't going to stop?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You can shoot better at a standstill."

"Yes, but see they are separating. They intend to flank us."

"They'll be very sick of that."

Jesse at the head of one squad came up at a run, and Frank with the other half on our right.

"Fire!"

A volley of shots answered the command, and I was quite sure I saw some men dropping from their saddles as leaves falling in autumn.

Frank James and the other half of the band were coming down on our right like the wind.

I saw that there was no time for dallying, and quickly clapped on all the steam necessary, and we flew away amid a shower of balls.

"Down! down!" I shouted, on seeing that we were going to be exposed to a raking fire from the enemy.

Immediately everybody was down in the bottom of the wagon. I managed the team and kept below the seat.

The ring of bullets against the iron rim and whizzing of leaden messengers above us made us quite glad that we were out of reach of them.

When we were beyond reach of their shots I once more rose to the seat and looked back at the banditti.

They had halted and were gathered together in a group.

"Now is your time, Brass," I said.

"Why, what to do?"

"While they are thus grouped let us have a shot from your long tom."

"All right. Come, Buttons."

"The gun is not loaded, is it?"

"No."

"Well, load it."

They drew out from the iron chest beneath the heavy gun a package of ammunition, and proceeded to reload the cannon.

In a few moments they had it ready and sent a shot booming right into the group.

Such scattering and dismay can better be imagined than described.

I saw James and Frank James trying hard to rally the daring outlaws, but all in vain. They were scattered.

In a moment I had the steam team under way, and was again turning toward the old stone house.

That did it.

We ran fast enough to wound two, but they did not stop.

In a few moments the smoke was cleared of the premises, and we again turned toward the old stone house.

"Look out, Frank!" cried Brass. "Go carefully, for they are not all gone away from there yet."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I can see them."

"Where?"

"One just now poked his head out of the window."

"All right. If they are going to make that a fort, we'll soon make them sick of it."

We ran up to within a quarter of a mile of the house and then I brought the steam team around, stern to the old building, and backed up a few rods nearer to the top of the hill.

"What are you going to do, Frank?" asked Brass.

"We'll lay siege."

"Cannonade them?"

"That's it. Go in now."

"All right."

They swabbed the little cannon, put in a cast iron ball, and sent it crashing into the stone wall.

We had both leaden and iron balls for our cannon, but against a stone wall the iron bullets would be most effective.

For the next half hour we continued to blaze away at the old stone house. A corner fell out, and we poured in a few leaden shots into the breach thus made.

"They can't stand it. See, they are coming out."

Half a dozen men, among whom we had little trouble in making out Frank and Jesse James, came out of the house last and went to their horses.

We had by this time backed up to the edge of the bluff, and reloading the cannon sent a ball whizzing at them, killing a horse.

Then we opened with small arms, and hit one fellow in the jaw.

"Frank Reade," roared Jesse James, shaking his fist at me, "I will be even with you yet for this."

Great as the distance was, his strong, terrible voice could be distinctly heard by every one of us.

The wind set toward us, however, which no doubt accounted for us hearing it.

He wheeled about with his men at his heels and galloped away.

We fired another shot at them, but by this time they were so far away that the ball only dug up the dirt behind them.

"Well, what now, Frank?" asked Brass.

"We'll go down to the old stone house."

"All right."

We had to run up the ridge almost two miles before we found a place where we could descend with the team.

Here we found a gentle slope, and the road wound down the hill so as to make the descent or ascent quite easy.

"I don't suppose, Mr. Reade, that there is a possibility of us getting down in a place here where we can't get out."

"Hardly possible," I answered. "I can drive the steam team almost anywhere that any kind of a team can go."

We ran down to the house and halted. The steam team was left with a guard of two, under some oaks, while the others began skirmishing about, so as to ascertain if the James Boys and their gang were gone.

Not one could be found, either dead or living.

Two dead horses, one below the house, and one on the hill above, were all we could find that gave any proof that they had ever been there.

We found some blood among the stones and debris in the house, but nothing to show whether we had killed any of their gang.

"I wonder what they did with their dead?" asked Brass.

"Guess they didn't have any."

"If they didn't I was one of the most deluded mortals that ever walked this mundane earth," said Brass.

"I guess it was a delusion," said Buttons. "I believe you trained the artillery."

"Yes."

"Well, that accounts for it."

"For what?"

"There being no dead."

"Why, you needn't boast, I can beat you shooting the very best day you ever saw in your life."

"Never mind boasting of your marksmanship, either of you," I put in.

"Yes, you had better keep a journal," added the professor who was squatted under a tree, busy engaged in writing in his journal.

Brass snorted.

"Now let's look about the place a little and see what they have been doing," said I.

We left the team and all save the old professor engaged in going about the premises to see what they had been doing.

Never was Gardner's Island so completely dug to pieces by men seeking after the buried treasures of Captain Kidd than were the grounds about the old stone house.

Holes of every depth were found, and the place had the appearance of a newly plowed field.

They had at last given over finding the treasure, and, as we afterward learned, were on the point of leaving the stone house when we came upon them.

"They didn't find it," said Brass.

"I guess not," put in Buttons. "I don't see why they didn't, though, for it seems to me as if every available part of the ground has been dug up."

"D'yer see that air tree?" asked the constable, pointing to an old oak.

"Yes."

"Wall, on that air limb which comes out a bit war hung the old man an' boy."

"Where were they buried?"

"At foot of it fust, but some o' their friends came an' dug 'em up."

"Perhaps they dug up the treasure, too?" I said.

"No, didn't."

"How do you know?"

"They said they didn't."

"That may have been done to throw you all off your guard."

"Why?"

"They might have had some fears at the time of going across the country with the treasure."

"Wall, I dun know erbout that, but them fellers war putty clusly watched, lemme tell yer, and ef they tuk erway any treasure nobody ever knowed it."

"What would have been done if it had been known they had the treasure?"

"Boys talked o' a divvy."

"Perhaps that was the reason they smuggled it out of the country."

"But they didn't do no diggin'."

"Didn't do any digging?"

"No."

"Not a bit?"

"None, except ter dig up them bodies, an' come across ther country ter the depot."

We had been half an hour searching about among the ruins of the old house, and Professor Drydust had been sitting busily engaged in writing his journal.

"I want to find that treasure," said Brass.

"So do I," put in Buttons.

"Well, you can't," I answered.

"We haven't tried," said Brass. "Now, my theory about such things is just this. It will be much more easy to find it now than it was before."

"Why?"

"Simply because they have dug over more than one-half of the ground, and all we'll have have to do will be to finish up the work."

"Well, boys, I don't believe we can spare the time."

"Why, there is a big treasure here. It would be worth much more to us than all the reward any three railroads will ever pay us for capturing the James Boys."

"But the treasure is not sure."

"Capturing the James Boys don't seem a dead certainty."

"I know that, but you forget—"

"Forget what?"

"We are not working on a contingency. We are paid a salary."

"Well, yes, I guess that is certain," said Brass.

"Quite certain."

"But the treasure would be more."

"Of course it would, but while we are wasting our time here we are neglecting the very business on which we came, and doing an injustice to our employers."

Brass looked puzzled for a few moments, and then said:

"Well, well, I don't want to do that, but you might give us an hour or two. Five minutes more work might lay bare the treasure."

"Go ahead," said I with a laugh. "I want an hour to write up my diary, so I will give you that length of time to dig in the dirt."

"Look here, Frank—"

"Well, what will I see?"

"Me."

"Oh, you are no pretty object."

"But I want to give you some advice."

"What?"

"Don't lose your head over your diary as that

old fellow has over his journal," and he gave a significant nod toward the professor.

I laughed, and said I thought there was really no danger.

"I don't know. It breaks out bad sometimes, you know."

I went away and left them. Brass, Buttons and the constable had gathered up some tools, some picks and shovels, and went to work digging away in the places which the others had failed to touch.

"Well, professor, how are you getting along with your journal?" I asked.

"Very well," he answered. "I have recorded almost everything. True, a few brilliant thoughts which were born of danger and excitement have escaped me, but they are few. Most of them have been recorded in my journal."

"I think I will bring up my diary while those fellows are digging."

"For what are they digging, Mr. Reade?"

"For the gold and treasure."

"What gold and treasure?"

"The gold and treasure of the rich old man who was murdered about here during the war by Quantrell."

"What, digging for that treasure?"

"Yes."

"It's a delusion."

"What?"

"A delusion, sir. I repeat and reiterate most forcibly and emphatically, sir, that the whole thing is a delusion."

"A delusion?"

"Yes, a delusion and a snare. The treasure is a delusion."

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONFUSION.

I HAD been so long led to believe that there had been a buried treasure there about that house that I was hard to convince there was not.

"Professor?" said I.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know anything of this affair?"

"All about it."

"Were you a relative?"

"No."

"A friend of the deceased?"

"No."

"Then how did you learn?"

"By means I do not care to reveal," he answered.

"What became of the treasure?"

The thin, cadaverous face brightened into a smile as he said:

"There never was any."

"What?"

"Never was any."

"Never any treasure?"

"No."

"But why was he killed?"

"It was reported that the old man had run off from his country to defraud his creditors, and that he had brought millions of dollars with him."

"But it wasn't so. They had only money enough to build that big stone house. It was all they had."

"And why were they killed for their treasure, which you say they never had?"

"They were killed because it was believed by all that they had an abundance of treasure. It was all a false report," said the professor.

"Well, there is no need of having those fellows wasting their energies!"

"Not the least, it's not there."

"Did you ever investigate the matter?"

"Yes."

"Thoroughly?"

"Thoroughly, quite thoroughly."

"And you are fully convinced?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you are fully convinced on the matter, we will give up any further thought of buried gold. But they had as well continue to amuse themselves as not while we are finishing our diaries."

"Ah, yes, it won't hurt them very badly."

"Not at all."

"Well, I want to ask you a few questions, professor, in regard to Mr. Allen and his daughter."

"All right—you haven't forgot them amid all we have gone through?"

"No."

"And you will make an attempt to rescue her?"

"Yes."

"All right."

"How far are we from there?"

"Well, it's—it must be—let me see—I don't

know for certain, but it must be seventy-five miles from here there."

"So far?"

"Yes."

"Well, we can make it in a day easily enough."

"But, Mr. Reade, that's a very delicate mission you are going on, do you know it?"

"Yes."

"How are you going to manage it?"

"Don't know."

"Any plans?"

"Only a general outline."

"What is it?"

"It is that we must, at all hazards, warn them."

"Yes, you are right."

"And we must save the girl."

"Yes."

"Will they believe us?"

"I don't know."

"How is Allen?"

"Rich."

"But his disposition?"

"Quick-tempered."

"Reasonable?"

"Yes."

"We can manage him—but the girl?"

"She is pretty."

"Very?"

"Yes."

"Reasonable?"

"Quite a sensible girl."

"Then I think we will have but little trouble in convincing her," I said.

Then I proceeded to write out my diary and completed everything in a few moments.

"Now I'll go and tell the boys to come on."

"All right, Mr. Reade. I will just get in the wagon and finish my journal."

He went to the wagon while I went to where they were still hard at work.

"Boys," I said.

"Yes," said Brass.

"We'll be going now. You have been playing here long enough."

Brass leaned on his spade and wiped the perspiration from his face.

"We haven't found it yet, Frank," he said.

"You haven't and you won't."

"Oh, yes; we've only got a little more digging to do, and we'll have the entire yard dug up."

"Then you won't find it."

"Oh, yes, we're bound to."

"No."

"It's here somewhere."

"No, it's not."

"Why? Has it been taken away?"

"It never was here," I answered.

"What do you mean, Frank?"

"Just what I say. The treasure which you are seeking was never buried here."

"Where was it buried?"

"Nowhere."

"Then where is it?"

"There never was any treasure. The old man whom Quantrell murdered for his money never had any money."

"Oh, how do you know that?"

"The professor there knows all about it. He has investigated everything, and assures me there was not a cent of money. The old fellow was insolvent, and came out to these backwoods to avoid his creditors, so you see it is utterly useless for you to dig any longer."

"I guess you are right if that's the state of affairs," and Brass threw down the shovel in disgust.

I called Buttons and told him the same thing.

Buttons looked aghast as he dropped his pick, and turning to Brass, said:

"Brass, you're a fool."

"I guess so," said Brass.

"And I am too," added Buttons.

They then gave up the idea of any further search for the treasure, and decided to go to the wagon.

"Guess I won't go any farther," said the constable. "Reckon the James Boys won't come or botherin' around here any more, an' I'll just gather up some o' ther boys wot's erround here, and make things hot for 'em if they come back. Seems ter me that most of our fellers hev run off, an' there ain't much chance o' getting 'em back soon. This land country seems ter hev gone ter the dogs, that's all that is er'bout it."

We left the poor fellow in his almost ruined country and took our departure.

"Now, professor, you must be our pilot."

"I'll steer you through," said the professor.

We were speeding over the prairie, along a beautiful road, when Brass suddenly climbed over into the seat at my side.

"Frank, I want to talk with you," he said, in a low tone. In fact he spoke so low that I could scarcely hear him, as the wagon and steam horses made considerable noise.

"Well, what do you want to talk about?"

"Him."

A nod backward accompanied his answer.

"You mean the professor?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"I've been studying him a long time, and I've finally come to the conclusion that he isn't what he pretends to be."

"That he is not a professor?"

"No."

"Then you think he is deceiving us?"

"It's just possible, Frank."

"Well, he is a shrewd fellow."

"Yes, and brave."

"Well, what do you think he is, Brass?"

He answered my question by asking another:

"Did you ever see his journal?"

"No."

"Well, I haven't, either."

"But we have heard him read extracts."

"Maybe they were what was in the journal and maybe they were not."

"That might all be true. I admit that the professor has never submitted his journal to me, as much as he has read it, and as much as he has talked about it."

"Well, there is something mysterious about him. He shoots too well and has too good a knowledge of criminals and things to be a professor."

"I have thought that."

"Did you ever think?"

"Think what?"

"That he might be fooling us."

"Yes."

"That he might be a —"

I didn't catch the last word, so I said:

"Please repeat? I didn't get that last word."

"That he might be a detective."

"Well, I have thought almost everything possible to think about him."

"And you have thought that, of course?"

"Yes."

"Well, I wish I only knew it for certain."

"We will have to wait and let time determine," I answered. "He is a shrewd one, and we must not let him outwit us. That wonderful journal of his may after all be an elaborate note-book."

"Just what I thought."

"And now, Brass?"

"Well?"

"There is another thing about this to consider."

"What is that?"

"After all, he may be deceiving us about the treasure."

"That is just what I had thought."

"It may be that there is a buried treasure there, and he is employed to find it. And it may be that he has been all these years looking for it."

"Yes, that is true."

"Well, now, go back and say nothing that will lead him to suspect us."

"I won't."

"And say nothing to Buttons."

"I won't, but Buttons has his suspicions, I'll warrant."

"I hope he won't give the professor reason to suppose he has any suspicions."

"No, he won't."

And then Brass went back, leaving me alone.

We had not run many miles ere night came on us.

We reached a small village shortly after dark, and almost ran the people out of the town as we came puffing and rolling into the village.

"Great goodness, it's a horse on fire," screamed one woman.

"Look at that now. Ef thar hain't a wagon pulled by steam horses."

"Oh, it must be the chariot o' fire come ter carry me up," cried one plump old woman.

A darky got frightened and ran away down an Indian creek where he plunged in and almost drowned himself.

But we managed after a bit to convince them that we were only common mortals of this earth, and that we would do them no harm.

When they were sure we were only ordinary mortals, they became more pacified and gathered in great crowds about us to inspect our wonderful machine, which they pronounced marvellous.

We fired well.

Everything we wanted within their power was given us without money and without price.

"Ain't you 'ns the fellers wot chased the James Boys out o' the country?" said one old man.

"Yes."

"Wall, we thort so. We've been up in arms here for three or four days on account o' 'em. Blame 'em. They burnt Micasia and robbed so many towns that we're a leetle mite skittish about 'em."

"We will drive them away if they come while we are here. They won't dare tackle the steam team," I asserted.

"That's all right, an' now yer kin hev anything yer want here thiet we'ns hev got."

We remained until morning and once more set out on our journey.

The roads in this part of the country, the extreme eastern part of Kansas, are very fine.

Trees grew along them in abundance, and there were beautiful farms. I found more civilization here than I had expected.

Only a few years before I had come to this part of the country on a tour of adventure and found it a wilderness, but now it was nearly all cultivated.

The plowman in the field paused and leaned on his plow as he watched the strange phenomenon speeding along the road at the speed of a lightning express. Then next the housewife stood in the door looking at us as she shaded her eyes with her hands. The watch dog barked until overcome by fright and ran under the house, where he continued to growl and bark most furiously.

We passed on, and at evening were in sight of a great farm and an immense cattle ranch.

It was large. Exceedingly large. There were hundreds of acres in the farm, and thousands in the cattle ranch or range, as it is sometimes called.

Great fields of wild grass had been fenced off, on which cattle were grazing in herds of hundreds and thousands.

The large farm-house or home residence of the owner and proprietor of this great range stood upon a hill. It was a large substantial building of stone.

The Kansas gray stone is of a very fine quality and I was struck with the beauty of the house.

"Who lives there?" I asked of Prof. Drydust when we were a mile or so away.

"Mr. Allen."

"Mr. Robert Allen?"

"Yes, sir, Bob Allen."

"The father of Louisa Allen?"

"Yes, sir."

"There is where we are going," I asked.

I thought I saw a shade of confusion come over the face of Prof. Drydust.

"Yes, yes—but to be sure, let me examine my journal."

He turned the leaves of his journal, and his pale, thin, hatchet-face seemed alternately to flush and pale as though he were at a loss what to do.

"Yes—ahem—here it is. This is the place where we were to find the Mr. Allen."

"Yes, and it was his daughter—"

"Yes, yes, yes—his daughter."

"She was the young lady whom you used to teach?"

"Ah, yes, yes—let me see. Let me look at my journal. Now I really do believe I made a mistake—yes, sir, a very serious mistake."

"What?"

"I was not her preceptor."

"Not her preceptor?"

"No."

"But I thought you said you were?"

"I—I was mistaken. I was at the house several times, but not in the capacity of a preceptor."

"What then?"

"Let me consult my journal."

The professor was growing more and more confused every moment.

I could not understand the cause of his confusion, and I glanced at Brass, who winked.

Brass' wink seemed to say:

"It's just as I suspected."

And I thought it was all just as I suspected.

"Well, well, well, what a singular affair. Why, I have called there in a dozen different vocations, once as a book-agent."

"It's a wonder they did not kill you," growled Brass.

"Ah, well, they do not treat book-agents here like they do in New York. You see they are not quite so plentiful."

"No, I suppose not. What capacity did you call in next?" I asked.

Oh, I have been there in various capacities, one way and another. I have sold goods there—a peddler, in other words. I was there seeking a job as heretofore."

"A likely looking cowboy you would make, I am thinking," Brass growled.

I gave Brass a look that silenced him.

"Then I went there as a farm-hand, as a surveyor, local preacher, music teacher, hunting stray cattle, peddling lightning rods, and carrying the mail. In fact, Mr. Reade, I have traveled over this country in so many different capacities that I find it almost impossible for me to attempt to enumerate all of them."

"Then they know you?"

"The people?"

"The people at the house."

"Yes."

"Well, you must introduce us."

"Yes."

"Now we must get on the right side of the farmer and cattle king, and the first stroke of policy will be completed," said I.

"Yes."

But I fancied that all through I could see that the professor was covered with confusion.

Two cowboys in the employ of Mr. Allen came galloping up toward us, and seeing the steam team, drew rein.

We came on cautiously, for we noticed that they carried pistols in their belts, and looked very much as if they would as soon shoot the strange animal as not.

Their ponies snorted and turned aside, bucking as only a professional mustang can buck.

We rode leisurely on, paying no heed whatever to them.

At last one of them yelled:

"Say, what air you, anyway?"

We all laughed at his odd manner, but Buttons, whose ready wit came to his aid, answered:

"We are a little Kansas cyclone killer."

"I believe ye, yes, I believe ye."

As he evinced a disposition to be talkative, I checked the steam team, and allowed him to spur his frightened pony alongside.

"Wall, stranger, yer got the slickest way o' travelin' I've seed in a long time."

"Rather convenient."

"Whar yer goin'?"

"To Mr. Allen's."

"Ah, the boss?"

"Do you work for Mr. Allen?"

"Yes."

"Is he at home?"

"Yes."

"Well, we want to see him."

"Guess ye'll find him at the house."

"Much obliged to you; good-day, boys—good-day."

"Good-bye ter yer, and I guess ye'll stun ther boss."

We ran down the road to the great old house, which, in that country, was a palace in elegance.

The cattle king came to the front gate to see what it was.

"Are you Mr. Allen?" I asked, alighting.

"Yes, sir."

"We have come to see you."

"Whom have I the pleasure of seeing?"

"You, perhaps, know Professor Drydust?"

"No, I don't."

By this time Professor Drydust, very ill at ease and covered with confusion, had alighted.

"Oh! ah, perhaps you remember me," he began.

"No, I don't," answered Mr. Allen.

"I was at your house."

"When?"

"Several times."

"I must a been away."

"I was a book agent."

Mr. Allen fixed his sharp, keen eyes on the confused professor for a moment and said:

"I don't remember you."

"I—I—didn't I teach your daughter?"

"No."

"Your daughter, Miss Louisa?"

"Never."

"Well, then I helped the cowboys. No, no! I sold goods here. Hang it, I was here in some capacity, and I know it," cried the confused professor.

"Perhaps you was, but I have no recollection in the matter," said Mr. Allen politely.

CHAPTER XIX.

MISCONSTRUCTION.

Seeing that the professor would get no farther with his bungling manner, I now interposed.

"Mr. Allen, I am Frank Reade, of New York, the inventor."

"Yes, sir, I've heard of you."

"I have come to see you on a matter of great concern to yourself. Perhaps it is best, how-

ever, that I defer explanation until we are alone."

The face of the cattle king grew a little pale, and he said:

"Very well; come in, gentlemen. Won't you run your steam team inside the barn, or do you prefer to leave it there?"

I told Brass to run it in the barn, and he did so, while I entered the house with Mr. Allen.

"If you wish it, we will go to my room right at once," said Mr. Allen, "and we'll talk on the matter about which you wished to converse."

"Very well, Mr. Allen."

He conducted me up to his room, and when we were alone he said:

"Now you can proceed, for we are alone."

"Well, Mr. Allen, to begin with, I am in the West on a strange mission, one attended with great danger. It is nothing more or less than the capture of the James Boys."

"It is a mission full of danger, I have no doubt. I never saw one of the gang that I know of, but they are terrible."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Allen, for unless I very much mistake you have been one."

"I."

"Yes you."

"When, where and who?"

"I can't give you the time. The place was at your own house, and the person whom you saw was the chief of the banditti, Jesse James himself."

"Impossible."

"It's true."

"How do you know?"

"Wait and I will tell you. I came west with my steam team, for as I have stated, the purpose of capturing the James Boys. One day they captured the steam team, when we were but a few rods away from it, and I ran and caught the wagon without their seeing me. I clung on the underneath side of the wagon and while there I heard a conversation between Jesse James and his brother Frank. It was to this purport. Jesse James had gone under an assumed name—I am not quite certain of the name he gave though I know it was assumed—been a frequent visitor at your house, was quite intimate with your daughter and was engaged to her."

"Why—why, there must be some mistake. You have misconstrued what he said."

"I have not. You have misconstrued your daughter's lover."

"Has she one?"

"Yes."

"What is his name?"

"Charley Howard."

"Where does he live?"

"At Independence, Missouri."

"Well, do you know he lives there?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it?"

"He says so."

"No one else?"

"No."

"Mr. Allen, I will wager my life that he is a fraud. He is Jesse James himself."

"Well, I—I—I can't believe it."

"Will you do me the favor to send for your daughter? This is a delicate matter, I know, but I think it best to come to an understanding."

"All right."

Mr. Allen was very reasonable, after all, and under the circumstances quite easy to manage. More easily managed than I had at first expected.

In a few moments he brought Miss Louisa Allen, who was a beautiful brunette, of about eighteen, with large dark eyes and a beautiful face and form.

"This is Mr. Frank Reade, Louisa, and he has come with a strange story."

"What is it?" she asked, growing pale.

I felt that it was almost cruel to tell her, but there was no other help for it, and I began and told her all.

"It must be Charley, papa," she said.

"Do you know him? Do you know any of his people, where he lives, and what he does for a living?"

"Only what he says."

"What does he say?"

"Sometimes he is in Kansas City and sometimes in Independence. But he travels long journeys somewhere, I don't know where."

"My daughter," said the cattle king, "I greatly fear that it is true."

"I do, too, papa, and I will give him his walking papers when he comes again."

"When do you expect him?" I asked.

"To-morrow evening."

"Please don't do that, Miss Allen," said I. "Let us be near. Let us see him, and if you have no objection we will take him in custody."

"I will. I will be glad to aid you to bring such a scoundrel as Jesse James to justice."

"Louisa," said her father.

"Well?"

"Do you care nothing for him?"

"Nothing, father. Now that he has deceived me I hate him."

"Let me explain, Miss Allen," I said.

"Proceed, sir."

"Jesse James is a very bad, bold, desperate man, and we may have to resort to desperate means in effecting his arrest."

"Do it then."

"Are you very brave?"

"I am."

"Will you dare risk it?"

"Arrest him right in my presence, and I will know then that it is done," she answered.

My plans were quickly arranged. I determined to send the steam team away, and consequently when we had had supper I called all aboard, and we ran away a few miles, leaving our wonderful machine in charge of Buttons at the ranch of a cattleman whom Mr. Allen assured us we could trust.

Then the professor, Brass and I returned after dark on foot, and reached the house of Mr. Allen about an hour before daylight.

The cattle king was waiting for us, and admitted us himself.

"None of the servants know a thing about it. No one but myself and daughter will know that you are here."

"Brass, that girl is brave," I whispered when we were alone.

"She has the grit, and she is as pretty as a picture," he answered.

"You are right; she is very pretty."

"Well, we've got nothing to do but wait here," said the professor when we had reached our room, "until night. We might employ our time on our journals."

I smiled, and Brass winked. As soon as he had an opportunity he took me aside, and in a whisper said:

"He don't write as much as he pretends in that journal."

"He is a great mystery to me, Brass."

"To me, too."

"I believe more than ever that he is a detective."

"Did you ever see his journal?"

"No."

"Or ask him to let you see it?"

"No."

"Do so."

"Why?"

"I'll wager a dinner at Delmonico's when we go back that he won't let you."

"I believe you, but I'll try."

So I approached the professor and said:

"Professor Drydust, I would like to look over your journal."

He raised his eyes and gave me an astonished glance, while a confused flush swept over his face.

After a moment he said:

"I—I beg pardon, really I—but you see, you must know that you will place a wrong construction upon it. Don't you know?"

"I think not."

"I can't show you my journal just yet. Wait until I have it filled out, then there can be no misconception."

I said no more. I was now more than ever convinced that we had put a misconception on him.

We slept most of the day, and when evening came were conducted to the rear parlor, where, through a crack in the folding doors, we could see any one in the parlor.

At sundown Mr. Allen reported to us a horseman coming, whom he avowed to be none other than Mr. Charley Howard himself.

I told the boys to be patient, keep cool, and we would soon have the great bandit king, Jesse James, in our power.

Miss Allen was in the parlor to receive him, and the Delilah who betrayed Samson was not more lovely than she.

We heard the tramp of horse's feet, and knew that Siroc was at the front gate.

A quick, firm step told that Jesse James was approaching the house.

I told Brass to seize the knob of the door on his right, and Drydust to take the knob of the door on his left, and at a given signal from me they were to jerk the door open, and I was to leap out on Jesse James, demanding his surrender, they, of course, to follow.

It was a well-laid plan, and with any other man would have been a success. But Jesse James possessed ears unusually keen, and when I gave the signal to throw open the doors he heard me.

One door caught for a single fatal instant, and the bandit was on his feet, a pistol in each hand.

"You have betrayed me, girl!" he roared, and one cocked revolver was aimed at Miss Allen's breast and the other at me.

"Hold!" he shouted. "A single step, a single movement, and I will send the girl and you, Frank Reade, to eternity."

I would not have hesitated a single moment on my own account, but how dared I endanger the life of Miss Allen?

"Stop!" I cried.

"I see through your game," said Jesse James.

"This is a very cleverly-laid trap to catch me, but you haven't done it yet. You know I will never be taken alive; I have sworn to that. Why should I be taken alive to be hanged—yes, slowly hanged—choked to death by slow torture? I—I would much prefer to die. Now if you will let me go out unharmed from the house I will spare you and the girl, for though I hate a traitress as she has proved, I can't kill her."

"Don't anybody hesitate on my account," said Louisa.

"Brave girl," said Jesse. "I honor you."

At this moment Drydust, evidently seeing an opportunity, with a yell made a leap at Jesse.

"Bang!"

A cloud of smoke.

Crash! window-sash, glass and all went as the bandit leaped through it.

"Who is hit?" cried I, as I heard a groan. The smoke lay too thick for me to make out who had been struck down.

But in a moment it cleared away.

"Brass, are you hurt?"

"No."

"Go quick—shoot him down!"

Brass ran out, and a few moments later there came the rapid discharge of fire-arms.

The whole family, servants and all, came rushing in the parlor. I ran to Miss Allen and asked:

"Are you hurt?"

"No," she answered. "Look at him."

It was Prof. Drydust. He was sinking, and before I could catch him had fallen to the floor. Brass came in to report that Jesse had mounted Siroc and made good his escape.

"What! is Drydust hit?" he cried, seeing me holding the dying man in my arms.

"Yes," he gasped, "I am killed. In a few minutes I'll be a dead man. But I want to say something."

"What? Speak quick, for you haven't many minutes."

"You have put a misconception on me."

"I know it," I said. "You are not Prof. Drydust."

"No."

"You are a detective?"

"I am not."

"What are you?"

"The only relative of the men who were hanged by Quantrell at the stone house," he gasped.

His breath came hard, and I knew the struggle would soon be over.

CHAPTER XX.

CONCLUSION.

"LAY him on the sofa," said Mr. Allen. "He will be better there."

Brass and I took him up gently and laid him down upon the sofa.

As soon as we had laid him down the servant brought the wounded man some water, and Mr. Allen got him a glass of wine. Then he revived a little, and I asked:

"Why are you here, if you are a relative of that man?"

"Seeking the treasure."

"The treasure?"

"Yes."

"I thought you said there was none."

"But there was—there is, and I feared your men would find it. The key to the treasure was in sight when we were there. They had turned it out of the ground, and I, fearing that some of you might discover it, determined to get you all away before you saw the key. I have spent years here looking for that treasure. I knew there was a key. A letter came to me before they were killed, telling me all, and—and I tried to find it. Just as the key was found I—I—well, it makes no difference now."

His breath came quick, and his sentences thick and voice almost inarticulate.

At last he said:

"It's all over now. I give and bequeath the treasure to Frank Reade—"

"Where is it? How can I find it?" I asked.

He turned his dying eyes, already grown glassy, upon me, and in a tone of voice that was sinking, scarce above a whisper, gasped:

"Read my journal."

He was gone. Dead.

For a long time we stood gazing on the mysterious man, who, despite his odd ways, was brave and generous at the end.

"Well, it's all over," said Mr. Allen, at last.

I now bent over him and took from his pocket his journal, in which he had kept a record of his past events.

It was not a regular diary, as daily incidents were not recorded, but more like a note-book of events, and without dates.

"Can you find what he meant by the key?" asked Brass.

"There must be an explanation in there somewhere?"

"No doubt."

"Well, read it through. That treasure will be our fortune."

"You don't feel, after all, that you are such a fool, do you, Brass?"

"No, and I knew it all the time."

I continued turning page after page, reading strangely disconnected accounts of the professor, who had been living a peculiar sort of life. His journal was by no means an autobiography. It was merely notes, something like this:

"I went in sight of the stone house to-day, and looked all over it. I went down and examined the ground, but I could not find the key stone."

Another page:

"I have almost a notion to go to digging anyway, although I was cautioned not to try it until the stone had been found."

A little further and I read:

"This is the twelfth year I have looked for that keystone and not been able to find it."

"Then we are as far at sea as he was," said Brass, when I had read this.

"No, we are not."

"Why are we not?"

"He told me the key stone was found, and said, read the journal."

"Who found the keystone?"

"I don't know. He said it had been turned up, and by reading the journal and the cypher in it it might readily be found."

"Well, read it."

I turned page after page as quickly as I could, and at last said:

"Here it is."

"The cypher?"

"No; that's on the first page."

"What, then?"

"About the key stone."

"Who found it?"

"A man named Brass."

"What?" roared Brass.

"Listen and I will read."

And I read:

"Now, having driven the James Boys away, Frank Reade approached the old stone house which he had been storming. I trembled when I saw that the James Boys had been digging all over the yard for the treasure. Then Brass and Buttons, with the constable, decided to finish digging up the yard. Though I never believed the treasure was buried in the yard, I never knew to a certainty, and consequently I fear it might be. I was anxious to get away, but dared not evince my anxiety. While sitting at the root of a tree I saw the fellow named Brass throw out a stone. It was a stone with a smooth surface on which were some letters cut.

"He threw it right at the foot of the blasted oak and without pretending to see it I saw that the stone had the key cut on it for finding the treasure which my uncle had buried."

"I trembled now for fear it would be discovered. But it was not. They did not see that strange letters and numbers were on the stone. Mr. Reade came to me and said they were hunting for the treasure and I told him there was no treasure. He believed me and we went away. As soon as they are gone I will go back, find the stone and dig my uncle's millions and I go to Paris."

This then was the great secret. We buried the professor, as we still called him, and bade Mr. Allen adieu. He thanked us and offered to reward us, but we accepted nothing.

When we went to Buttons and told him all, he was amazed. We set out at once for the stone house and found the key stone. It read S. W.

cor.—house—42 rods—and 6 links to a stone. Dig 3 ft. We had a surveyor's chain and measured the distance, dug three feet and unearthed three millions of dollars in gold, which

I will divide with my companions. We have decided to set out to-night for New York.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Diary ends with the above and we have no information of Frank Reade's

further attempt to capture the James Boys. We learned that he and two detectives, Buttons and Brass, were very rich from money found out West.

[THE END.]

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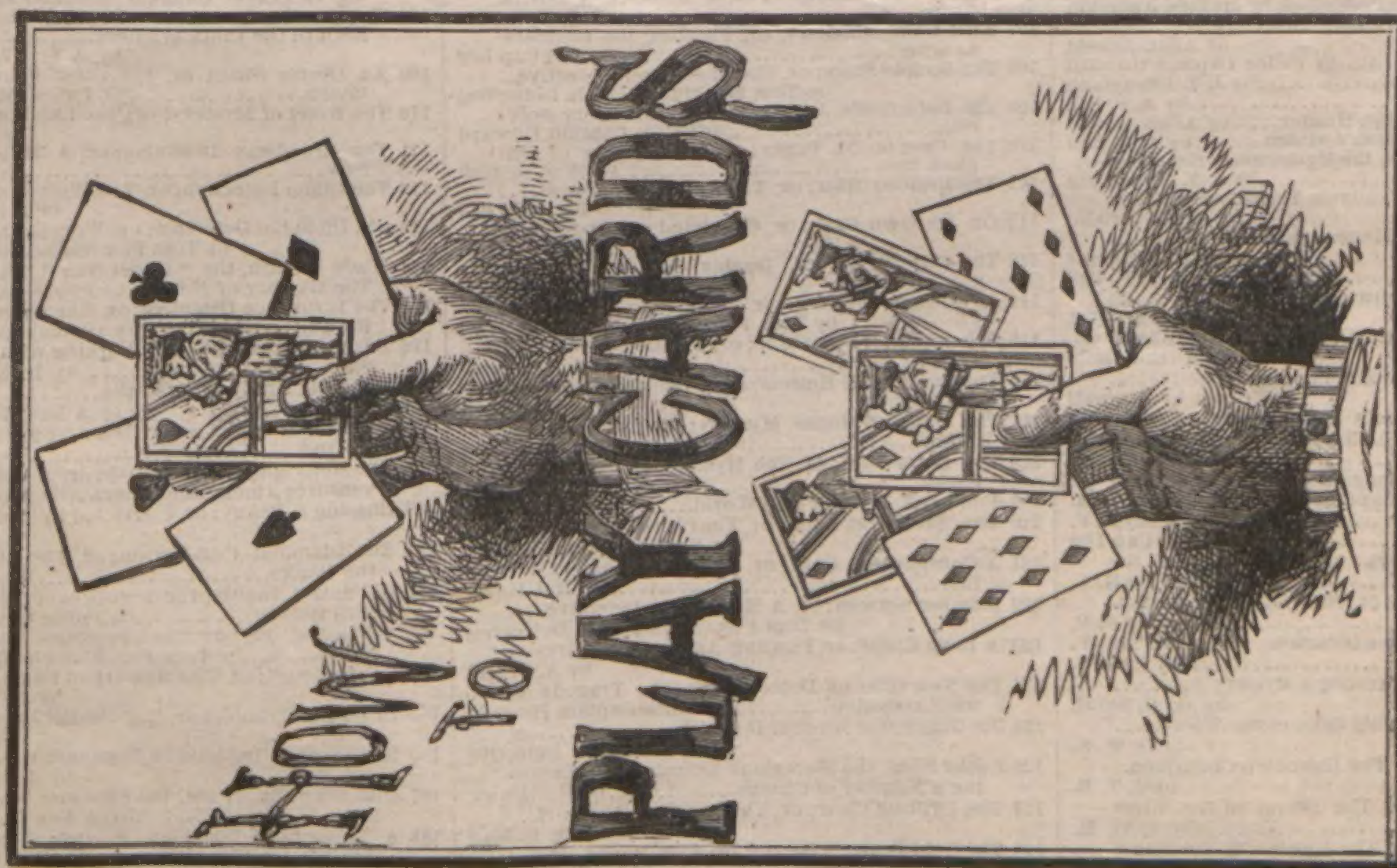
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